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ABSTRACT

The conference papers presented in this volume focus on the urban experience as reflected in minority literature. The essays deal with the works of contemporary Afro-American, Chicano, and Puerto Rican writers. The central theme of these papers is the struggle for survival and cultural identity in American cities. Particular attention is given to the dilemma faced by racial minorities who are confronted with racism as well as alienation. Specific literature discussed includes childrens' poetry, short stories, novels, black poetry, sociological literature, and journal articles. (EB)

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SELECTED PROCEEDINGS OF THE 4TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE ON MINORITY STUDIES

APRIL, 1976

MINORITY LITERATURE AND THE URBAN EXPERIENCE

Editors:
GEORGE E. CARTER
JAMES R. PARKER

Assistant Editor:
SARA BENTLEY

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

SARA BENTLEY

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-LA CROSSE

"Multi-Racial Cities: The Perspective of 200 Years of Racism and Liberation" was the highlight theme for the 4th Annual Conference on Minority Studies. This volume presents selected Conference papers focusing on the urban experience as reflected in minority literature. The essays deal primarily with the works of contemporary Afro-American, Chicano, and Puerto Rican writers. What is significant about the literature examined is that common themes are expressed with great cultural and stylistic variation. The central theme which runs throughout this body of literature is the struggle for survival and cultural identity in the dehumanizing ambience of America's cities in the last half of the twentieth century--a universal dilemma made doubly difficult for racial minorities who must confront racism as well as alienation.

The essays that follow will illustrate that this underlying theme brings unity to the diverse expressions of minority writers. The commonality of theme allows their work to transcend its ethnic and cultural roots and to reflect the universal human condition in the urban environment.

In the opening essay, "Ethnic Children Speak Out," Edith Blicksilver presents the eloquent words and poetry of urban ethnic children searching for identity and self-esteem in a hostile world that rejects them for being who and what they are. Their powerful statements reveal the keen insights that children have into their experience and their ability to separate illusion from reality in their environment. The whole range of human emotion--anger, bitterness, pride, determination, love, and hate--is expressed directly, simply, and dramatically in their writing. They demonstrate a poignant need to communicate their dreams, fears, and hopes for a better life and to vent their frustrations creatively rather than through violence, withdrawal, and despair.

Blicksilver complements the children's poetry with concrete suggestions for conducting writing workshops and encouraging the creative expression of the experiences of minority children. Further, she illustrates how this literary expression can be an important dramatic resource in the teaching of ethnic and minority studies.

In Part II, four essays focus on the city as the center setting for literature of selected Afro-American authors, whose writing has become increasingly urban oriented since World War II.

Dennis Daley Lynch explores "Visions of Chicago in Contemporary Black Literature" and finds that diversity in theme and style is characteristic of Afro-American fiction. The writers whose works he analyzes all view Chicago as a cold, crass, violent, and destructive city. However, this view is expressed in a variety of ways, including Willard Motley's harsh and polemical novels in the naturalistic tradition, Richard Wright's subtler but powerful existentialist writing, Ronald Fair's more optimistic tales of vitality and virtue that give a promise of regeneration of human values, and Cyrus Colter's short stories that are

concerned with the common, mundane desperation of ordinary people. Lynch concludes that "though the settings of their works are alike, in style and theme they are disjunct."

In his study of major themes in Gwendolyn Brooks' *Family Pictures* and *Beckonings*, William H. Hansell finds a reaffirmation of the themes and styles expressed in Brooks' earlier poetry--that is, the African roots of Black Americans, the celebration of Blackness and Black heroes, and a call for Black unity and militancy. At the center of her work are the immediate and commonplace lives of ordinary people and the conviction that violent struggle is and will continue to be an inevitable reality. She condemns passivity and scorns compromise in the face of exploitation and oppression. She warns against false leaders and encourages Black youth to act with strength and determination in the "knowledge that there are no absolutes, no certainties . . . " since "change, however achieved, will not be worse than present conditions."

R. Baxter Miller focuses on another work of Gwendolyn Brooks in his paper, "Define . . . the Whirlwind; *In the Mecca*--Urban Setting, Shifting Narrator and Redemptive Vision." He views *In the Mecca* as "a most complex and intriguing book; it seeks to balance the sordid realities of urban life with an imaginative process of reconciliation and redemption." *In the Mecca* "represents opposite strains of the Anglo-American tradition . . . the naturalistic version of Walt Whitman and the redemptive, if frustrated, potential of T. S. Eliot. These influences work so that the peculiarities of the Afro-American experience transform them into a new and creative vision." He finds that Brooks reveals a great talent for integrating Black folk myth and legend into Anglo-American literary tradition and for creating unity out of opposite points of view.

In "Beyond Sociology? Urban Experience in the Novels of James Baldwin," James Vopat finds that Baldwin "examines the dynamics of environmental pressures on the self and notes the paradoxical consequences of deep personal loneliness in the midst of urban congestion." Baldwin is concerned with "the compounding effects of racism on an already alienating urban environment" and with "the double trauma of being Black and urban." For Baldwin, what distinguishes literature from sociology is the "journey towards a more vast reality." His focus on the individual and the personal and his emphasis on "improving the self rather than society" are what separate Baldwin's literature from sociology.

Part III of this volume presents four essays dealing with contemporary Chicano and Puerto Rican literature.

In his essay, "Moral Decay in La Perla in San Juan and Harlem in New York: A Study of a Renaissance Theme in Modern Puerto Rican Literature," Richard A. Valdés considers the thematic relationship between modern Puerto Rican literature and traditional Spanish literature. In Spanish Renaissance literature, writers lamented the artificiality, pressures, and corruption of courtly life and the loss of traditional values while extolling the virtues of simple country life and pastoral settings. This same theme is expressed in contemporary Puerto Rican literature which focuses on immigration from the countryside to the urban slums of La Perla in San Juan and Harlem in New York. The influence of the United States as a sophisticated, urbanizing force sets the scene for conflict between city and country values. The alienation, moral disintegration, and destructive nature of urban life with the accompanying stifling of human values are juxtaposed to the simple, virtuous country life and values formerly enjoyed by many of the Puerto Rican immigrants.

Rodolfo Cortina Gómez, in his essay, "Race and Indentity in Puerto Rican Literature," outlines the importance of race in the forging of a Puerto Rican national identity. Puerto Rican racial heritage contains three basic strains--indigenous, European, and African. Cortina Gómez traces the changing influence of each strain in literature. Because of political, economic, and religious domination, the Spanish heritage was more highly valued and esteemed during colonial times. In the nineteenth century, the influence of the Indian heritage on the formation of Puerto Rican and Antillean character became more pronounced in literature. By the twentieth century, writers begin to highlight the African heritage through Black and mulatto characters. Throughout there is an attempt in the literature to differentiate the national identity from external influences.

In his essay, "Barrio Versus Ghetto: The Poet Versus the Sociologist," Nicolás Kanellos challenges the concept of the barrio as synonomous with ghetto. In his view, this is a misapplication of the term which leads to stereotyping of the barrio as a setting for poverty, crime, and social pathology. He maintains that for people whose home is the barrio, it is far more than a geographic reality. It is a colonized area whose inhabitants do not govern their own community and includes the reality of political oppression, but it is also a total community with a class structure, culture, and values growing out of its own historical experience. Kanellos turns to contemporary Chicano and Puerto Rican poets to communicate the sentiments that barrio life brings forth for Latinos. For these writers, "the barrio is the forge on which his identity is shaped." The barrio to the Latino is much more than the ghetto is to the sociologist. "The ghetto is created by the oppressor out of hate, mistrust, racism, capitalism. The barrio is created by the Latino . . . out of love of family, friends, neighbors."

The central purpose of Marvin Lewis' study, "The Urban Experience in Selected Chicano Fiction," is to determine to what extent urban problems are dramatized by contemporary Chicano writers. He concludes that Chicano writers have gone beyond stating the obvious about discrimination, police brutality, and inequality. Much of their work transcends ethnic and cultural lines and mirrors the universal problems of the urban environment while maintaining a strong sense of Chicanismo. The authors supersede cultural limitations by moving from "social realism to fantasy and magical realism in different interpretations of the urban experience."

Taken together, these essays provide new insights into the depth, breadth, and diversity of interpretations of the urban environment by minority writers. Common themes run through the contemporary literature of Afro-American, Chicano, and Puerto Rican writers, yet within each there is a great diversity of style and emphasis. By providing unity in theme through diversity of expression, this literature offers a rich body of resources for a comparative and interdisciplinary approach to the teaching of ethnic and minority studies.

The editors wish to thank the many people whose dedicated efforts resulted in the success of the 4th Annual Conference on Minority Studies. The financial support of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse administration is greatly appreciated. Special recognition is extended to Chancellor Kenneth E. Lindner who has consistently encouraged and supported the series of Conferences which began in 1973. Finally, the editors thank the participants whose interest in the Conference continues to grow and whose contributions provide the basis for stimulating discussion of current trends in ethnic and minority studies.

PART I

MINORITY-ETHNIC LITERATURE

ETHNIC CHILDREN SPEAK OUT*

EDITH BLICKSILVER

GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

There is a euphemistic tendency for sociologists to use words like "inner city" or "disadvantaged geographical area," but the word "slum" to most of the people, especially the children living there, means poverty, violence, dirt, and despair.

The intention here is to show that urban ethnic children, if given the chance and a sympathetic audience, have good insights into their condition, separate the illusions from the realities of their home and their environment, and, most important of all, are a neglected teaching source in a multi-ethnic course or a study on minority problems. Too frequently attention is directed toward the urban problems of ethnic adults; not enough concern is given to the need for ghetto children to have an audience in order for them to speak out, express their dreams and hopes for a better life than their parents have had, and maybe vent their frustrations before these frustrations are expressed more tragically through violent acts or conversely through withdrawal, despair, and loss of all hope in bettering their own lifestyles.

So the voices of children should be heard even if their ability to write is not always equal to their ideas. All children are special, and it is important for teachers to encourage them to be freer in their writing and to describe what it is like to be a member of a distinct minority group.

In addition, children should feel free to speak without fear of being evaluated or judged. They have to explore their ideas and not be concerned about teacher approval of their life style or of their literary work. The more rigid the teacher's requirements regarding neatness, micrometer margins, or perfect spelling, the more rigid the writing. In other words, discipline in writing has to be imposed from within because these children have to feel free to express themselves on paper, with attention to mastering the mechanics of writing after they have spoken from their hearts. Creative writing workshops encourage young people to honestly express their feelings and thereby discover a little bit of what they want out of life, why their family life is intolerable, how they can leave an unhappy urban environment, through self-fulfillment.

One approach in order to encourage children to express themselves is to write one word on the blackboard, such as "Death" or "Love" or "Fear" or "Hope," and then say "write." Children can even be told to take their writings with them if it is too personal to show or to read aloud. Once they have written, perhaps just a paragraph at first and then a page or two as their confidence increases, they can either sign their names or not as they wish. A poem is an ideal way of self-expression. Follow-up personal conferences are valuable so

*Excerpts appear in *Georgia English Counselor*, Vol. XVI, No. 18, Spring 1977, pp. 4-5, and in Edith Blicksilver, ed., *The Ethnic American Woman: Problems, Protests, Lifestyle* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 351-53.

that the teacher can encourage children to revise their papers stressing correct spelling and advising them to polish their style. Usually a sympathetic classroom will encourage honest expressions of internal feelings.

Gradually as they feel more self-confident and trust the other members of the class, the creative writing workshop can serve as a vehicle whereby they can read their papers aloud, discuss their problems, accept the advice of others as the sympathy of those in similar situations, and even polish each other's writing style. Imagine the pride in becoming a literary critic and having someone actually accept your suggestions for a sentence revision.

If students trust the teacher and the other class members, the writing is intensely personal and fulfills the purpose of telling exactly what urban experiences are like after a certain stage in their lives.

Children can also be encouraged to keep a journal to describe their reactions in a spontaneous way. Gradually they will learn how to stress unity and discipline, their writing focusing upon a specific subject. They have to be reminded that even professional writers struggle with the same problems of disunity and evasion. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald kept a journal in which he recorded situations and observations. Students should be encouraged to write down anecdotes, unrelated flashes of thought or memory, with disconnected words and phrases. Thus, daily writing helps them loosen up and let the images follow each other loosely by association and, most important of all, helps them understand themselves better. Indeed, there is an intimate relationship between use of language and understanding of ourselves and of others. Ethnic groups have different cultural and behavior patterns and are influenced by self-image and socio-economic status. In particular, language reflects cultural differences and ethnic patterns as well.

The four categories that can be explored through the writings of ethnic children are: (1) "Who Am I?" in which they write about their families, friends, and school, but mostly what it is like to be specifically Black, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Asian American, or Native American. The writing is sensitive, perceptive, sometimes bitterly resentful, occasionally heartbreaking, but through this means, young people can creatively express their feelings and learn to know themselves better. (2) "How I See My Neighborhood," in which they reveal the realities of urban life telling about poverty, drugs, and violence. Some children are filled with despair; others reveal their growing anger, bitterness, or bewilderment. But ghetto children have happy experiences, too, and pride in being part of a close-knit ethnic community as some of the writings reveal. (3) "The World Beyond," in which children have contact with life outside the urban community through radio, television, and the movies. They are exposed to a world in which cat food commercials show people concerned about catering to their pets' fussy eating habits or the jet set vacationing on the French Riviera. Children have the opportunity through their writings to fantasize about money and what they would do and buy with it. (4) Finally, "The Cycle of Life, The World I Can't See or Touch," in which children analyze their feelings about love, growing up, and have a chance to write down their perceptions about God, their fear of dying, hope, and joy.[1]

A few children will write what they think a teacher wants to read, but most

---

[1]Stephen M. Joseph, *the me nobody knows* (New York, 1972), Introduction, contains innovative teaching techniques.

write honestly because they seek fulfillment or they want to speak for themselves instead of letting ethnic adults, psychiatrists, or sociologists speak for them.

Here, for example, are excerpts from the writings of children exploring their own identities, each work relating to one or more of the four categories already described.

The following poems by Hispanic American and Black American children tell what it feels like to be rejected because of ethnic origins.

Margarita Virginia Sanchez
Sanchez was thirteen years old when she wrote "Escape." She now lives in California and continues to write poetry.

ESCAPE

Last week,
I had been white
. . . we were friends

Yesterday,
I was Spanish
. . . we talked . . .
once in a while.

Today,
I am Chicano
. . . you do not know me.

Tomorrow,
I rise to fight
. . . and we are enemies.

et alma[2]

Linda Curry
Brooklyn, New York (Erasmus Hall)

Why do the white men lie
Why do they tell us plus teach us
That Christ was white

Why do they only talk about how
Great the white man was and
how poor the black
why when they do talk about
the black they tell you minor things
about him not facts but lies
is anybody brave enough to give
or to tell me these answers?[3]

---

[2]Philip D. Ortega, ed., *We Are Chicanos*, An Anthology of Mexican-American Literature (New York, 1973), p. 208.

[3]Virginia Olsen Baron, ed., *Here I Am!* (New York, 1971), p. 119.

But some Black and Hispanic American children respond with ethnic cultural pride to Anglo rejection.

Michael Gill
Age 13

THE DAYS OF MY PEOPLE

The days of my people, lonely, sad; hiding behind a wall of black trying to protect their pride. That's right, their pride. I have many friend of the street, of the slums. I wish i were out of these slums. I wish I could just go out and live a clean life and go to a good school. I wish I could, but, we're Black and Black is hard to recognize by some people. I said to my friend "you should know how beautiful this world is. I wish I could just take it to our people." Oh, God, help us on the days of my people.[4]

Miriam Lasanta
Age 14

MY SOUL SPEAKS SPANISH

My soul speaks Spanish.

It speaks of how I have to ignore some prejudiced white's eyes. Of how I have to laugh at the things people say about the way we are.

My soul speaks Spanish and I'm proud it does. I'm not white, I'm not black. I'm colored. I'm Puerto Rican. Sometimes I hear my people say they're white and that would get me angry and then they say they're black.

I wouldn't say nothing because black people and us Puerto Ricans have to face the same problems. We have to face prejudice. But now all I know is that my soul speaks Spanish, pure Spanish and baby, I'm proud, so proud, to have a Spanish soul and to be colored. Colors are beautiful, by the way . . .[5]

Clorox
Age 17

WHAT AM I?

I have no manhood--What am I?
You made my woman head of the house--What am I?
You have oriented me so that I hate and distrust
My brothers and sisters--What am I?
You misprounce my name and say I have no
Self-respect--What am I?
You give me a dilapidated education system and

---

[4]June Jordan and Terri Bush, collectors, *The Voice of the Children* (New York, 1974), p. 64.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. 59.

You say I have no dignity and then deprive me
Of my culture--What am I?
You call me a boy, dirty lowdown slut--
What am I?
Now I'm a victim of the welfare system--
What am I?
You tell me to wait for change to come, but 400
Years
Have passed and change ain't come--What am I?
I am all of your sins
I am the skeleton in your closets
I am the unwanted sons and daughters in-law, and
Rejected babies
I may be your destruction, but above all I am, as
You so crudely put it, your nigger.[6]

Frank Cleveland

The ambivalent love-hate relationship between siblings of the large ghetto family is poignantly depicted in Frank Cleveland's poem ironically titled "Rejoice."

REJOICE

Rejoice children, little brother, he's dead.
Why, that's the best thing that could happen to
Him
'Member how dark he was why, he'd never've gotten
Further than high school.
He couldn't pass like you do Rodney.....
So what, he was only two years old.
Now he's gone,
There's more food to go round.
Rats got to him in his crib and they had a feast
Now I can go back to school and play in the
Afternoon.
'Cause I don't have to babysit.
Don't have to pay no more doctor and clinic
Bills: Can pay Mr. Goldberg all the back rent
On the apartment.
Maybe now he'll fix the falling plaster, leaking
Toilet bowl, and give us a new stove and ice box.
Yeah brothers and sisters, I'm so glad little brother
Is dead.
He don't have to go through what we have.[7]

Native Americans have been included in this study even though most of them do not live in ghetto areas. But those whose free lifestyle radically changed after white men enclosed them within a confining reservation environment deserve to express themselves as forcefully as those living in urban slums.

Notice the cultural pride, the bitterness and the criticism of the Anglos' educational system expressed in these works.

---

[6]Joseph, *the me nobody knows*, p. 42.

[7]*Ibid*, p. 119.

Ophelia Rivas
Papago/Grade 8: Santa Rosa School, Arizona

INDIANS

Indians are native people
here before the Pilgrims came
here before Columbus came
here before the Vikings came
Yet, we are treated
As though we don't belong here
Indians are native people
here before the Pilgrims came
here before Columbus came
here before the Vikings came
Yet, we are treated
As though we just got here.[8]

Cathy Enriquez
Papago/Sophomore: Steward Indian School, Nevada

SOMEONE I'LL NEVER FORGET

There's a certain love I have for a wise old white-haired lady, my Indian grandmother. (She was actually my grandmother's sister.)

I was her eyes, her hands, her legs, and I talked with her, laughed with her, wept with her; but there was one beautiful thing I admired and will never forget which only she possessed, and that was her mind.

I loved her for what she was. She taught me the great undying pride of our heritage. We'd spend hours in the warm days talking of everything under the sun, while I pushed her in her crude, homemade wheelchair. She'd sing, and then I'd join in, and you could hear our voices blending and echoing in the valleys. She had a full rich voice which I still dream of . . . then we'd laugh together of little things that we'd found humorous.

If I'd had my way, I would have spent my life with her, speaking her language, which was Papago, and learning of things . . . we two, and her creaking wheelchair. But heaven took her from me one spring afternoon as the flowers were blooming.

I was young then, only about ten or eleven. Sometimes I dream about her, and when times are bad, she seems to smile and say, "Yes . . . I know it's bad, little one, but dry your eyes and try again."[9]

---

[8]*Arrows Four*, Prose and Poetry by Young American Indians (New York, 1974), p. 103.

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 110.

Lillian Gwin
Gros Ventre-Arikara/Senior: Flandreau Indian School, South Dakota

I WISH

I wish I could see the campsite of my ancestors and hear the laughter of children playing Indian games, and men talking about the last hunt, or see the women sitting quietly on the ground tanning a fresh deer hide.

I wish I could sit by a clear pool of water, see my reflection in its purity, and let my horse drink. Instead, I look into the pond at a shoe, a piece of paper, cans, old tires, and I say to myself, "My great-grandfather wouldn't have watered his horse in this muck!"

I sometimes wish I could ride, ride, ride, and never see another white man's building. But at night when I lie down on the white man's bed, I look out the window and up to the stars twinkling merrily, and I know that the Great Spirit, who put them there, also planned the Indians' new pathway. I promise myself that I will face the white man's tomorrow with a prayer in my heart for the unity of man. He would want it that way.[10]

Bruce Doyle
Cherokee-Creek/Senior: Sequoyah High School

THUS SPOKE THE ESTABLISHMENT

Students for today's lesson
I
want you
to write on the Roman Empire
If you don't
You are not going to get a grade
or a future job
or any Respectable
place in life.

Teachers for today's lesson
I
want you
to think on the Human Soul
Here
If you don't
You are guilty
of Murder
every day
as
You play
Axman
for the King

---

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 106.

Your king
of minds
in the Righteous Name
of knowledge
without Wisdom
Bitter
My words
You say eh
well I speak Truth
and I
a Fool
have spoken them
If
they be wrong
then let the most
Criminal
among you refute them.

You there Boy
come here
You've got to be smart
son
you're going to learn to think
our way
It's the only way we're going to teach you
then when
you're old enough to know
we're wrong
You'll have to think
about it
Our way

you won't know what is wrong
You'll feel it though
and you'll rebel
against it
or against those
who rebel

You'll give up
and
you'll
be dead
like the rest of us.

I'm number one
life's fun
i'm happy

I'm number two
me too

I'm number three
count me

I'm number four
one more

I'm number five
I'm happy

I'm number six
I'm happy

I'm number seven
I'm happy

I'm number eight
I'm happy

I'm number nine
I'm happy

I'm number ten
I'm happy

This is a recording.

World going up in smoke
Don't care
People dying everywhere
Some joke

Young man, they scream,
save us
from
our stupidity
You've got a mind
You've no right to keep it for yourself.
Help us!
Why won't you save us?

World going up in smoke
Don't care
People dying everywhere
Some joke
You wouldn't listen anyway.

Blow the light out will you?
I'm tired
Sleepy in my head.
Rush Rush Rush
to nowhere.

Click...
Automatic Program Set A-14.1
Click...
Bypass Safety Switch ARG 2A
Circuit overload

Click...
Automatic Logistic Weapons Systems
Circuit corrected.

Click...
Error due to circuit FG-01.035
Click...Click...Click
ICBM 12AF through 490AF deployed
Click...
Enemy ABM's destroyed
Automatic Program Set A-14.1 completed
Click...
Automatic Program Set 1-EX4
Click...
All ICBM's deployed
Click...
Computed overkill 7.1901
Damage Total
ICBM's on target 100%
Click...Click...Click...
We won
Click.

The hot wind blows
across a lonely world.
The sun falls
and the soft vigil
of an eternal radioactive twilight
begins.[11]

Notice the clever use of the rat symbolism in this poem by a Puerto Rican boy.

ABOUT THE RATS

The rats sell drugs
they take it--they use it--
they stick themselves with dirty
needles
They use it in the Bronx
they get into cocaine like they get into
the billiard clubs
they play nodding out pool
they are behind the eight ball
georgie lopez will be the DDT against
the rats
they get into the basements
with a gang of grass and coke
The rats sell to old men
old ladies and to young people like
me georgie lopez
But georgie lopez is the DDT against

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

the rats
I am the rat poison that will get into
the corner of the corner of the streets
oh man, yeah, man yes there are plenty of
rats and we need more cats
the cats will have a war against the
rats very soon
I know, I know, because I am
georg;e lopez DDT against the
Rats.[12]

Mahalia Jackson

Discrimination was part of gospel singer Mahalia Jackson's girlhood experiences, and she tells of her hopes and her fears when she moved from her home in New Orleans to Chicago in 1928. She has been included to show that prejudice need not hinder one's struggle to achieve success.

My aunt Hannah, who was going back to Chicago, took me along with her on Big Number Four--the express train that ran straight through up North. Before we left we cooked up some food and took it along in a big basket. We sat up in our seats for two nights and a day and ate it. It was many years before I ever saw the inside of a railroad dining car without being put behind a screen so the white folks wouldn't have to see me.[13]

Monica Itoi Sone

Sone's autobiographical *Nisei Daughter* (1953) contains some revealing insights into the effect of this stereotyped version of the Japanese American upon a sensitive young schoolgirl.

Although I had opinions, I was so overcome with self-consciousness I could not bring myself to speak. Some people would have explained this as an acute case of adolescence, but I knew it was also because I was Japanese. Almost all the students of Japanese blood sat like rocks during discussion period. Something compellingly Japanese made us feel it was better to seem stupid in a quiet way rather than to make a boner out loud. I began to think of the Japanese as the Silent People, and I envied my fellow students who clamored to be heard. What they said was not always profound or even relevant, but they didn't seem worried about it. Only after a long, agonizing struggle was I able to deliver the simplest statement in class without flaming like a red tomato.[14]

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[12]Miguel Algarin and Miguel Pinero, eds., *Nuyorican Poetry*, An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings (New York, 1975), p. 42.

[13]Gerald Leinwand, ed., *Minorities All* (New York, 1971), p. 143.

[14]Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, Shawn Wong, eds., *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, pp. 10-11.

The Japanese-American detention camp memory was the subject of this revealing poem.

LULLABYE

My mother merely shakes
her head
when we talk about the war,
the camps,
the bombs.

She won't discuss
the dying/her own
as she left her self
with the stored belongings.

She wrapped her shell
in kimono sleeves
and stamped it third class
delivery to Tule Lake.

Futokoro no ko
child at my breast
oya no nai
parentless.

What does it mean to be citizen?

It is privilege
to pack only what you can carry.

It is dignity
to be interned for your own good.[15]

Ferris Takahashi

What was it like to be a Japanese-American during the hostilities generated by the attack upon Pearl Harbor? The following poem, "Nisei, Nisei!," by a sensitive young girl named Ferris Takahashi, an American girl born of Japanese parents, relates an incident of inner anguish more poignantly than the same account could be described by a reporter or a sociologist who is himself emotionally uninvolved.

NISEI, NISEI!

I have no face--
This is a face,
(Nisei, Nisei!)
My face of astigmatic eyes,
Other eyes.

A composite of sneer and word
The cherry blossom and the sword,

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[15]David Hsin-Fu Wand, ed., *Asian-American Heritage*, An Anthology of Prose and Poetry (New York, 1974), p. 162.

Where I hang as on gallows wood;
(Nisei, Nisei!)

Set in the island centuries
Of the mixed stock Yamato breeds.
(And this is censored:
No one reads
Of our dissimilarities,
Nisei, Nisei!)

Is this so yellow?
Brown and plain
White are the skins of old Japan.

I have no face.

My sallow cheek
Is greenish in the subway light,
My parents' mild and patient eyes
Mocked in these narrow apertures;
Look, glasses make this low-built nose
The shadow of a caricature.
(Nisei, Nisei!)

Give me the eyes that form my face!
All outside eyes, all looking down,
The eyes of every day that frown,
The starry world, the street, the job, the eating place--
All eyes I envy for their anonymity.
(Nisei, Nisei!)

This is mirage.
These are my twenty years of youth--
To look the thing I hate and what I am:
(Nisei, Nisei!)

Where is the heart to scour this enemy mask
Nailed on my flesh and artifact of my veins?
Where is the judge of the infernal poll
Where they vote round eyes honest and mine knave?

This a dream.
These eyes, this face
(Nisei, Nisei!)
Clutched on my twitching plasm like a monstrous growth,
A twinning cyst of hair, of pulp, of teeth. . . .

Tell me this is no face,
This face of mine--
It is a face of Angloid eyes who hate.[16]

The experience of World War II made this unnamed Chicano poet question with his mind and his heart the validity of the American dream.

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[16]Lillian Faderman and Barbara Bradshaw, *Speaking for Ourselves*, American Ethnic Writing (Illinois, 1975), p. 277.

TO BROTHERS DEAD CROSSING THE
RAPIDO RIVER...194?

in a day
in an afternoon
in a night
in years of fury
and tears
alone and far from home
away from familiar sounds
tender arms
you fell on the earth of italy
blood of mexico
blood of northern deserts
blood of the bitter border
spilled on earth of italy
on the earth of italy
hope of america
the vain hope of america
never realized hope of america
against a wall of teuton steel
you waded the chilling river
waters tasting
of death
far from home
tasting of sudden death
left you dead on the river banks
tears of mothers on the river banks
hopes of sweethearts on the river banks
left tomorrows on the river banks
bitter yesterdays on the river banks
for a hope
vain hope.[17]

Luis Omar Salinas
Salinas struck a deep note of despair and mourning as he touched the meaning of war and what the meaning held for the Chicano community.

DEATH IN VIETNAM

the ears of strangers
listen
fighting men tarnish the ground
death has whispered
tales to the young
and now choir boys are ringing
bells
another sacrifice for America
a Mexican

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[17]Antonia Castañeda Shular, Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, Joseph Sommers, *Literatura Chicana* (New Jersey, 1972), p. 42.

comes home
his beloved country
gives homage
and mothers sleep
cardboard houses

let all anguish be futile
tomorrow it will rain
and the hills of Viet Nam
resume
the sacrifice is not over.[18]

Diana Chang

Chang, born in New York but taken back to China by her parents during her girlhood years, explored attitudes toward the inner world in this poem called "Second Nature."

SECOND NATURE

How do I feel
Fine wrist to small feet?
I cough Chinese.

To me, it occurs that Cezanne
Is not a Sung painter.

(My condition is no less gratuitous than this remark.)

The old China muses through me.
I am foreign to the new.
I sleep upon dead years.

Sometimes I dream in Chinese.
I dream my father's dreams.

I wake, grown up
And someone else.

I am the thin edge I sit on.
I begin to gray-white and black and in between.

New England moonlights in me.

I attend what is Chinese
In everyone.

We are in the air.

I shuttle passportless within myself,
My eyes slant around both hemispheres,
Gaze through walls

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[18]*Ibid.*, p. 43.

And long still to be
Accustomed,
At home here,

Strange to say.[19]

The poem by Diana Chang and those describing the second World War experience by three Japanese Americans and two Chicanos are not the works of ethnic children, but instead are the recollections of adults whose internal bewilderment or degrading experiences were not or could not be described when they were children. Instead, sometimes painful wounds festered, unable to heal. Years later the remembrance became the subject of a poignant poem, such as "Incident" by Countee Cullen.

INCIDENT

Once riding in old Baltimore
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee
I saw a Baltimorian
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.

Hopefully, now an ethnic child is able to tell about his painful or joyful experiences as he searches for his unique identity and as he explores the world beyond his own community. We must give every child, and especially those of ethnic origins, the opportunity to express themselves freely, to speak for themselves. No proud ethnic American child should feel that his cultural past is imprisoned in Anglo history or that his only future is as an invisible swimmer in the American mainstream.

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[19]Wand, *Asian-American Heritage*, p. 137.

PART II

BLACK LITERATURE

VISIONS OF CHICAGO IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK LITERATURE

DENNIS DALEY LYNCH

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

DEKALB, ILLINOIS

If you knew Chicago you'd talk about it too. If you haven't been in Chicago, you haven't been in the United States.

-- Willard Motley

Since World War II, black literature has become increasingly urban oriented; one may be hard pressed to find contemporary equivalents of *Cane* or *Banana Bottom* in their emphasis on the rural aspects of life. The city is now the primary center of black life, and it is not surprising that it is in the big city where black writers often set their works. As novelist Clarence Major remarks,

> Black writers today are more urban than white writers. All the white writers have moved to the country and the upsurge of black literature, its vitality, may have resulted in no small measure from this recent development, not to mention all the other more obvious causes. I mean, you have to live in a great city in order to feel the pulse of the time and if you don't feel it the energy of it won't be present in your work. In the earth it is at the point of the most intense pressure that the diamond is created.[1]

A look at the views of black writers of the last thirty years of just one major city, Chicago, may not only give insights into the urban visions of a diverse group of novelists, but may also indicate where black literature has been and where it is going.

Willard Motley's three large novels of Chicago--*Knock on Any Door* (1947), *We Fished All Night* (1951), and *Let No Man Write My Epitaph* (1958)--are firmly grounded in the naturalistic tradition. At its best, Motley's writing about Chicago is as vigorous and forceful as any found in Dreiser or Farrell; yet at its worst, Motley's style suffers from some of the same failings of his naturalistic forebearers--an awkwardness of phrasing, inappropriate diction, and sloppy syntax. But blemished as it is, Motley's style in *Knock on Any Door* is still oddly appealing. Like the outfit of a skid row bum--a jacket too small, pants too large--Motley's work often seems hopelessly ludicrous; yet we can never really laugh at it. Instead, the style is curiously fitting for Chicago; like that city it is often lumbering, excessive, and crass, but it is also always human and ultimately compelling. Motley is Chicago's Rude Bard, his prose a melting pot

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[1]Clarence Major, *The Dark and Feeling: Black American Writers and Their Work* (New York: Third Press, 1974), pp. 18-19.

containing everything from crude colloquialisms to would-be poetry. The mixture in this pot is never an even one; it is often harsh and odiferous. Yet it is like the city it portrays.

"The city is the world in microcosm,"[2] a conglomeration of all nations and peoples, writes Motley. When young Nick Romano of *Knock on Any Door* is sent from Colorado to Chicago, ironically to get "away from your bad influences" (p. 83), he is initially happy. "This was all right! This was new and exciting. It wasn't smalltown. Things happened here" (p. 88). However, Nick's first day on Maxwell Street is enough to change his mind as it turns his stomach. He sees beggars, blind men, and bums pass in a parade of depravity; he then witnesses an automobile gorily run over a puppy and notes the unconcerned attitude of the city's people. This image of the dog's death, like the fight between the lobster and the squid which the young Frank Cowperwood observes in the opening pages of Dreiser's *The Financier*, will haunt Nick and will become a symbol of the coldly destructive power of the city, for this minor accident is merely a prelude to Chicago's symphony of violence. That night Nick has a vision: "In the street in the dark ahead of Nick were the reform school grounds. Again he was staring through the little diamonds of its tall wire fence" (p. 97); the literal reform school of Colorado has been traded for the metaphorical prison of Chicago, and, as in Clarence Major's *NO*, this psychological and sociological prison is a virtually inescapable one.

The only respites from the city's torment are provided by infrequent trips to Wisconsin or the forest preserves for fishing trips or idyllic lovemaking. It is on one such trip that Nick spends "the best day of my life" (p. 260). Yet there is just one real escape from the city's squalor: only through the murder of a policeman will Nick win his passport to freedom--a seat on the electric chair. He fulfills his motto, "Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse!" (p. 163). But as his lawyer claims, Nick's crime is society's:

> We might say Nick is guilty--he is guilty of having been reared in desperate poverty in the slums of a big city. He is guilty of having the wrong environment and wrong companions. He is guilty of the poolrooms and taverns whose doors were open to him from the time he was fifteen. . . . (p. 458)

We leave *Knock on Any Door*, like Nick, without illusions. We see

> Beyond the pile of factories, below the slowly spiraling smoke--shacks, tenement buildings, crumbling little slum houses, Nick's neighborhood. Ugly, vile, vicious, River, shamed, creeping away from Nick's neighborhood. Look around. A Nick in every block . . . in every third house. Furniture set out on the street . . . gas turned off . . . electric bill overdue . . . politician buying notes . . . police taking bribes . . . beating in heads, making the law . . . greatest percentage of relief, prostitution, unwed mothers, criminality, syphilis, juvenile delinquency, poverty . . . right here, in this pockmark, this hollow, this district . . . man with a gun, boy with a gun. (p. 474)

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[2]Willard Motley, *Knock on Any Door* (1947; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1950), p. 9. All subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

"The city doesn't change" (p. 9), writes Motley, and neither does his view of it change in either *We Fished All Night* or *Let No Man Write My Epitaph*, two notoriously poor novels. In the latter work, for instance, the recurring image of the town is that of "a blue-black beast in the night."[3] It claws and gashes the people of the novel. There is "no cesspool so deep" as North Clark Street and "no night so dark" (p. 181). "Chicago has a painted face and dirty underwear," and "The dead dreams of three million people walk the streets" (p. 185). In Chicago "The living go on living. They are the ones who suffer" (p. 287). Motley's urban vision, then, is one of virtually unmitigated bleakness; it pictures a world in which Nick could have remarked, as a character in Chicagoan Odie Hawkins' *Ghetto Sketches* (1972) does: "life is a cold-blooded game."[4] A contemporary white counterpart to Motley's work is William Brashler's *City Dogs* (1976); both works are filled with the despair of the defeated urban masses. Studs Lonigan or Frank Cowperwood would feel at home in either work.

Though the two men cared little for each other, Richard Wright, in his vastly underrated novel, *The Outsider* (1953), presents a Chicago similar in several respects to that found in Motley. The protagonist, significantly named Cross, carries the weight of the Four A's: "Alcohol, Abortions, Automobiles, and Alimony."[5] But Wright is a much subtler writer than Motley; he sounds his points with a soft manipulation of fictional elements rather than with harsh, polemical anvilling. Wright sets the Chicago portion of his novel in winter, a winter of Cross' discontent. (Wright himself first came to Chicago on a cold day in December, 1927, and was disenchanted with the unreality of what he saw.[6]) The frigid world mirrors the coldness of Cross' wife, mistress, and employer.

"You look like an accident going somewhere to happen" (p. 70), his boss tells Cross (in an echo of Bigger's remark in *Native Son*: "I feel like something awful's going to happen to me . . . something I can't help."[7]), and right after this a freak El crash gives Cross a chance to switch identities with an accident victim and escape his troubles, the rubble of the wreck reflecting the tortuous twistings of his ruined life. He adopts the name of Webb, and this name is also prophetic as he is ensnared in a net of murder, a murder as unpremeditated but unavoidable as the initial murders in *Native Son* or *Savage Holiday*. After Cross changes identities, and is observing the church in which a funeral is being held for the man believed to be Cross, the aspect of Chicago is bleak and barren, reflecting his own mental state:

> He was empty, face to face with a sense of dread more intense than anything he had ever felt before. He was alone. He was not only without friends, their hopes, their fears, and loves to buoy him up,

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[3]Willard Motley, *Let No Man Write My Epitaph* (New York: Random, 1958), p. 34. All subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

[4]Odie Hawkins, *Ghetto Sketches* (Los Angeles: Holloway House, 1972), p. 118.

[5]Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (1953; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 3. All subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

[6]Major, *The Dark and Feeling*, pp. 62-63.

[7]Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 24.

but he was a man tossed back upon himself when the self meant only a hope of hope. The church across the street was still there, but somehow it had changed into a strange pile of white, lonely stone, as bleak and denuded of meaning as he was. And the snowy street, like the church, assumed a dumb, lifeless aspect. . . . Nothing made meaning; his life seemed to have turned into a static dream whose frozen images would remain unchanged throughout eternity. (pp. 101-02)

As Cross leaves Chicago for good, he has a final vision of the city:

> The dreary stretches of Chicago passed before his window; it was a dim, dead, dumb, sleeping city wrapped in a dream, a dream born of his frozen impulses. Could he awaken this world from its sleep? He recalled that pile of steaming garbage, the refuse the world had rejected, and he had rejected himself and was bowed, like the heap of garbage, under the weight of endurance and time. (p. 117)

Wright's Chicago is not as overtly malevolent as that of Motley; the terrors of the city work more insidiously, come upon one more quietly. The final effect, however, is a numbingly overpowering sense of entrapment, doom, and despair; it is the coldness of an existential hell, the barrenness of a room with *huis clos*. And though Cross can leave the city, his problems will follow him to New York with a vengeance; there is no real escape.

Ronald L. Fair's *Hogbutcher* (1967)[8] is a more optimistic look at the urban dilemma. The plot verges on melodrama: While running home one day, Cornbread, a young basketball star, a paragon of all that is gentle yet manly, is shot down in cold blood by trigger-happy policemen who think the youth is running away from a crime. A riot ensues. Later, witnesses to the shooting are subjected to massive pressure to cover up the incident. Only one person, ten-year-old Wilford, has the courage to testify to the truth; his simple honesty causes one of the policemen to confess.

As a tale of virtue triumphant, *Hogbutcher*'s story is simple enough, and the book has become a staple at many high schools. Just as the work's fable is romantically pat, so is its irony often transparent: In the first paragraph of the book, Cornbread makes a basket, and someone says to Wilford, "You see that shot? Man, you see that shot?" But sandwiched between the narrative sections of the novel are interchapters of social history and commentary; these passages contain the most passionate and political pages of the book. One part reads: "This thing they called Americanism only worked when it was applied to someone else. This lie they call democracy, this insidious myth they call fair play, this vicious thing called the American way of life was not meant for the black man."[9] *Hogbutcher* pictures a Chicago reigned over by towering factories which belch forth their detritus on the ghetto in the name of wealth and progress--a city of white vigilante committees, of bribed government officials, and, until the victory of

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[8]The work is now being published under the title of *Cornbread, Earl, and Me* to capitalize on the success of the movie of the same name which was based on *Hogbutcher*. The change of title from book to film is telling, for the movie tones down the bitterness, outrage, and social comment of the novel.

[9]Ronald L. Fair, *Hogbutcher* (1966; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1973), p. 101. All subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

Wilford, of a Kafkanian bureaucracy which renders impotent the average man seeking justice. Chicago is a city whose police action in danger situations stands in ironic contrast to the Police Department's own training bulletin which in part reads, "The police officer, by disciplining his emotions, recognizing the rights of all citizens, and conducting himself in the manner his office demands can do much to prevent a tension situation from erupting into a serious disturbance."[10]

When Wilford witnesses the violence men inflict upon one another, his reaction is as poignant as any Nick Romano felt:

> He was suddenly afraid of grownups--all grownups--now that he had seen what torture they could bring on a man, now that he had seen the butchery from the other side of the counter, black and white carving each other to pieces. He was terrified. (p. 27)

Yet Wilford, unlike Nick or Cowperwood, refuses to play the city's game of exploitation, and thus Fair's book is finally not a dirge of dejection but instead a celebration of man's potential. Speaking of the day when blacks will finally master Chicago, the narrator remarks, "the city will be a richer place, it will be a place poets dreamed of, it will be a place with free people, and it will breathe again, it will be alive" (p. 81). The narrator finds the promise of regeneration

> . . . among the black youth and those who have not. There is an awakening among the youth that says destroy--destroy the old, obsolete systems. There is a vitality that is blossoming among the stone and steel weeks of Chicago. There is, among the young, among the undeformed, the uncorrupted, the uncompromised, a desire to change the way of life. The young, too, like the system, have an awareness of history, and they don't like the history they know. The young are not afraid of losing their jobs. They look forward to the strength it brings to one. The young are not old enough to be silenced easily and the system will have to resort to harsh measures to contain them. And each cruelty that befalls the ambitious young will strengthen them and reinforce their dreams and they will survive and they will fight and they will destroy the system. Then there will be a new system. Then there will be a new city. And perhaps . . . [Fair's ellipsis]. (p. 178)

Wilford's act of courage is a clarion call heralding the new city.

"There should be books written about these people right here" (p. 118), a character in *Hogbutcher* remarks, and this book, written at a time when the media was misrepresenting the size, number, and causes of inner city disturbances, is an eloquent and non-apologetic explanation of black rage and disillusionment. Written before such events as the shooting of Fred Hampton made the general white audience aware of official coverups, *Hogbutcher* is also an indictment of government corruption; and written when meeting violence with violence was considered as one form of protest, Fair's work affirms the power of simple, non-violent righteousness.

Perhaps the most stunning portraits of minority Chicagoans to be found in contemporary literature are contained in Cyrus Colter's remarkable volume of short

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[10]*Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam, 1968), p. 326.

stories, *The Beach Umbrella* (1970). On the back cover of the work, Kurt Vonnegut writes, "When I came upon his tales . . . I suddenly found myself having a lovely time. He was telling me all sorts of magical things about life I'd never known before," but a couple of Vonnegut's words have misleading connotations. I cannot imagine anyone having a "lovely time" with these stories, for these are tales of quiet and not-so-quiet desperation: an alcoholic woman tries unsuccessfully to leave her common-law spouse ("The Rescue"); an old man and his dog slowly die together in a rented room ("Moot"); two young heroin addicts attempt to console one another ("Mary's Convert"). These plots are not so much "magical" as mundane. In marked contrast to Motley, Wright, and Fair, Colter's work contains few acts of violence. He is concerned not with the sensational event but the commonplace one, not with the excessive but with the ordinary.

Like Motley and Wright, however, the picture Colter paints of Chicago and of human life is largely a dismal one. Colter's city is perhaps the most inclusive Chicago of any black writer, containing sketches of not only the poor ("Rapport") of Forty-Third Street, but also the black bourgeoise ("The Lookout") of Hyde Park and "*Le haute monde noir*" ("After the Ball") of the Near Northside. Yet at all levels life is miserable. When her lover asks what is wrong with her, a young housewife replies, "I don't know whether I know myself, or not. Maybe it's that I'm just existing. Not living--just existing."[11] A dying businessman remarks, "Most of us are so damned mediocre and insignificant we're forgotten as soon as we're gone" (p. 112). Likewise, a poor pensioner is forced by the death of his dog to reflect on "the futility of all life" (p. 134) and is horror-stricken; he soon dies himself of "a kind of ennui" (p. 137). Alcohol is consumed in virtually every story--the poor drink rot-gut whiskey on Forty-Eighth Street, the rich sip champagne at the Continental Plaza, their common purpose being "to dull [their] miserable existence" (p. 126).

Colter's Chicago, like Nelson Algren's, is a city where conversations are all too frequently spoken at cross purposes, where people suffering from a dreadful kind of lonesomeness try to only connect, but meet instead hostility or indifference. Every major character in *The Beach Umbrella* is old, if not in age then in spirit. They seek release in fantasy. Of a depressed social climber it is written, "She had always loved the snow; it made the world look so unreal and insubstantial. Dreams had a better chance of coming true in a world of unreality." Yet these dreamers find that "sooner or later the snowing always stopped--as it had today--and [they have] nothing to do but to return to earth with a cold and bitter heart" (p. 62). What we find in Colter is not the naturalism of Motley, pointing the finger of blame for tortured lives outward at society, but rather the existentialism of Wright, turning the mirror of awareness inward to oneself. The moments of existential awakening in Colter's work are not as overt as that of, say, Bigger in *Native Son*, but they are present nonetheless. Colter's characters are finally forced to consider the consequences of their own deeds; unfortunately for themselves, they do not move from nothingness to being, but instead, because of their own frailties, remain somewhere in between. Colter's Chicago is a limbo of lost souls.

Colter's stories are stories that need to be told. One character remarks that the death of an old man is

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[11]Cyrus Colter, *The Beach Umbrella* (Chicago: Swallow, 1970), p. 74. All subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.

> "Moot. M-O-O-T."
> "Say what? What do you mean?"
> "I never looked it up but it's a legal word meaning it don't matter no more. Or not to worry 'bout it. Or it's water over the dam--it's moot." (p. 138)

Yet this is surely not what Colter believes, as he gives to even his most superficially mundane subjects a tragic dignity. And though the stories themselves are insightful glimpses into the everyday world, we must agree with Lonnie of "An Untold Story," who remarks:

> "Th' story's only for th' unthinkin'--an' the unfeelin'. That's what Prof said. Hell, it ain't nutin', that is, compared to some uv th' deeper thangs. You just kinda hold onta th' story, in the back o' your mind, one-hand-like, while you're goin' in deeper--way deeper . . . inta th' other. . . . " (p. 159)

He later adds: "I said th' story ain't nuthin' . . . nuthin'. It's what's buried way down underneath th' story . . . th' fucked-up world" (p. 161).

Diversity is one measure of a literature's strength; if contemporary white writing can offer such diverse talents as Bellow, Barthleme, and Sukenick, then contemporary black literature can offer Baldwin, Reed, and Williams. The varying views of Chicago in black writing range from Jean Toomer's view of the city as a place of lost connections in "Bona and Paul" to Odie Hawkins' comment that the ghetto is an American reservation, a Bantustan. Likewise, the poetry on the urban experience ranges from the rage of Lawrence Benford's "The Beginning of a Long Poem on Why I Burned the City" to the nostalgic acceptance of Giovanni's "Nikki-Roasa." The differences in style and theme found in the fiction of Motley, Wright, Fair, and Colter are a testament to the sprawling growth of minority fiction; these four writers defy pigeonholing together. For though the settings of their works are alike, in style and theme they are disjunct. Wright's understated protest in *The Outsider* is balanced by Fair's passion; Motley's lumbering and subjective prose is complemented by Colter's lucidity and objectivity. Indeed, stylistically, moving from Motley to Colter is not unlike moving from Dreiser to the early Joyce. The progression from Motley to Colter also reveals perhaps a greater self-reliance on the part of black writers. Motley, though black himself, chose to concentrate his novels on white characters. When asked, "Why do you write about people around West Madison Street rather than about Negroes?" he incredibly replied, "I find the plight of the people on West Madison Street more urgent."[12] In Motley, black characters exist only in relationship to white ones, either as victims or foils. In Wright and Fair, on the other hand, one gets an increasing sense that blacks can define and live their own lives. In Colter the transformation is complete; there is not a single major white character in *The Beach Umbrella*, nor does the work need one. Tensions operate not along racial lines, but along inter- and intra-personal ones. We are witnessing an increasing tendency in black literature to turn inward, a returning in a backward motion toward the source. At their best, Wright, Fair, and Colter approach having written what Clarence Major would call "whole books, works with a rounded sense of humanity."[13]

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[12]Major, *The Dark and Feeling*, p. 96.

[13]*Ibid.*, p. 15.

ESSENCES, UNIFYINGS, AND BLACK MILITANCY: MAJOR THEMES IN GWENDOLYN BROOKS' FAMILY PICTURES AND BECKONINGS

WILLIAM H. HANSELL

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN CENTER

SHEBOYGAN, WISCONSIN

Family Pictures and *Beckonings*, two collections of Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry published in the 1970's, if considered thematically and stylistically, are very much like collections of her verse published in the late 1960's.[1] The call for militancy and communal unity, the celebration of Blackness, Black heroes, and the role of the poet all are major concerns. In a somewhat more traditional vein, of course, Brooks also has written love poems, elegies and eulogies, in a wide range of tones.

This study, moving from minor to major themes, will attempt to demonstrate that, midway through the decade of the 1970's, it seems clear that Brooks continues to be inspired by the same subjects that were the burden of her poems in earlier periods. More specifically, the bulk of her work in the recent period is all but indistinguishable from such collections as *In the Mecca* and *Riot*, both of which appeared in the late 1960's.[2]

The few poems devoted to love and religion express characteristic attitudes. Comment will be made on only three love poems. In a blues idiom, "Steam Song" (*Beckonings*) voices an abandoned woman's response to a "good Song":

> That Song boil up my blood
> like a good Song can.
> It make this woman want to
> run out and find her man.

"Friend" (*Beckonings*), another love poem, is far removed from "Steam Song" on the spectrum of emotion; it calculatingly evokes a twilight mood:

> It is the evening of our love.
> Evening is hale and whole.
> Evening shall not go out.
> Evening is comforting flame.
> Evening is comforting flame.

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[1] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Family Pictures* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970), and *Beckonings* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1975). All quotations are from these works unless otherwise indicated.

[2] Gwendolyn Brooks, *In the Mecca* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), and *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969).

"A Black Wedding Song" (*Beckonings*) insists, as Brooks has often insisted in the past, that the "World" is a great enemy to lovers:

> For war comes in from the World
> and puzzles a darling duet--
> tangles tongues,
> tears hearts, mashes minds;
> there will be the need to forgive.

In an early poem about a minister called "The Preacher Ruminates Behind the Sermon," the minister's compassion was portrayed as far more important than any formal religious function to be served. Brooks seemed to imply that extending love and sympathy to sufferers outweighed any other service the man might render. She seems to repeat that belief in "Song: The Rev. MuBugwu Dickinson Ruminates Behind the Sermon" (*Family Pictures*). The major difference between the poems, perhaps, is that in "Song" the preacher urges political action, insisting that just being good is not enough. And as the title in the recent poem indicates, Christianity is more definitely rejected because, as the poem says, it "is what you learned when . . . little and 'a fool,' [and] you sat in Sunday School."

When Brooks again takes up art and the role of the artist, the reaffirmations of her ideas is self-evident. For example, an elegy to her brother opens *Beckonings*. Entitled "Raymond Melvin Brooks," the poem celebrates his love of work and life and people, but most of all, Brooks stressed her brother's love for and capacity to beautify the immediate and commonplace:

> He knew how to put paint to paper--
> made the paper speak and sing.
> But he was chiefly a painter of days and the daily,
> with a talent for life color, life pattern:
> a talent for jeweling use and the usual,
> a talent for practical style.

Everywhere one looks in either her prose or verse, one finds irrefutable evidence of the importance to her of the immediate and commonplace. Thirteen years ago, for example, Professor Arthur P. Davis commented at length upon Brooks' primary concern with the commonplace lives of ordinary people in her immediate environment.[3] Brooks herself, in a 1969 "Interview," declared her intention "to respond to her climate."[4]

Moreover, the aesthetic theory implied in the elegy is almost a transcription of a recent article which appeared in *Black Books Bulletin*.[5] In the article, Brooks has general praise for the energy and creativity of several young poets; yet she also expresses a fear that formal and technical matters have been gaining precedence over things she considers more important. She writes:

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[3]Arthur P. Davis, "Gwendolyn Brooks: Poet of the Unheroic," *College Language Association Journal*, VII (1963), pp. 114-25.

[4]George Stavros, "An Interview with Gwendolyn Brooks," *Contemporary Literature*, XI, 1 (Winter 1970), pp. 1-20.

[5]Gwendolyn Brooks, an article appearing in *Black Books Bulletin*, Vol. 3, 2 (Fall 1975), pp. 16-18.

> I observe too many little indications that some of our singing brothers and sisters, in the worrying grip of current frustration and vagueness, are willing to settle for "the pretty little thing," the handsome harmony, the obscure conundrum. I like prettiness, I like music, I like games and puzzles. But I *don't* think we black poets can afford to forget what, in 1967, 1968, 1969, we bravely decided we are *about*. The issues remain too large; the threats continue; the sewers deepen, and reach for us with an ever more ravenous hunger.

Brooks then goes on to condemn her own youthful "errors" in the direction of "prettiness": "Reminds me of certain little timidities of my *own* in the late Forties--and I was *wrong*!"

The black hero has been a preoccupation of Brooks throughout her career, and the collections under consideration reaffirm her view that true black poets are of necessity Black heroes. Brooks' tribute to Paul Robeson in a poem in *Family Pictures*, somewhat like her praise of Malcolm X and Medgar Evers, stresses his masculine defiance of stereotypes, his rejection of amelioristic strategies, and his commitment to Afro-American unity. The poem states that Robeson's true meaning was

> that we are each other's
> harvest:
> we are each other's
> business:
> we are each other's
> magnitude and bond.

Robeson was a radical critic of the United States from an earlier generation and may be a reminder to the present generation that black militancy has a distinguished history. Another poem in *Beckonings*, entitled "To John Oliver Killens in 1975," also states the poet's commitment to art that inspires "black solidarity" and "kindness."

One section of *Family Pictures* is entitled "Young Heroes" and is made up of the following three poems: "To Keorapetse Kgositsile (Willie)," "To Don at Salaam," and "Walter Bradford." The central idea of "Willie," an abstract and difficult poem, is that Willie is a hero and poet because he understands that art improves life. Since Afro-Americans are threatened with genocide ("a scientific thinning of our ranks"), the Black poet must teach that the only viable response is to unify in order to resist violently. According to the poem, "Afrika" sends the message that "Blackness is a going to essences and to unifyings." The alternative could mean cultural or racial extermination.

"To Don at Salaam" has the directness and simplicity and concreteness of Brooks' finest poems. Unlike the poem to Kgositsile and Bradford, which stress in explicit terms their contribution to Black nationhood, "To Don at Salaam" is, on the surface at least, most like a love poem. But the Don in the poem (who in all likelihood was Don Lee, poet, editor, and critic, among other activities, and who is now Haki R. Madhubhuti) epitomizes the honesty, beauty, integrity, and controlled force of the authentic black poet.

The third and last of the "Young Heroes" is a poem entitled "Walter Bradford" in which Bradford is saluted as a dynamic person who conceivably could jolt even

the most inert people into motion by virtue of a seemingly uncontainable energy. The poem itself is playful, although the tribute is, no doubt, seriously intended.

As if asked to supply a set of characteristics diametrically opposed to those of the Black hero, Brooks responds with a poem in *Beckonings* entitled "Horses Graze." "Horses Graze" seems at first to celebrate a view of life which is almost absolutely acquiescent. Walt Whitman's famous celebration of the insouciance of animals and his desire to live among them in order to escape human beings, whose discontentments often make life miserable, comes to mind. For "Horses Graze" seems to approve animal satisfaction until her satirical intention is recognized and the full force of her contempt is poured out on creatures who "love" indiscriminately and "eat" and "eat" and "eat." And Brooks very deliberately gives her poem universal meaning:

> In Sweden,
> China,
> Afrika,
> in India or Maine
> the animals are sane;
> they know and know and know
> there's ground below
> and sky
> up high.

The distinction between up and down may be the only one they are capable of making.

On a more whimsical and optimistic note, wonderfully simple and direct advice is given to her "children" in "When Handed a Lemon, Make Lemonade." The poem, from *Beckonings*, allows Brooks to observe in her homeliest manner that "trouble" can be turned into a valuable and useful possession and should in no way be denied or rejected; therefore, "When Handed a Lemon, Make Lemonade."

Brooks continues to explore and expose the mystery of blackness. A poem in *Family Pictures* ("The Life of Lincoln West"), for example, is a ballad-like recreation of a Black child's escape from shame and self-hatred to a conviction his Blackness is a source of pleasure and pride. But before he learns that, he lives with the daily agony of parents who can just barely tolerate his presence and schoolmates, a white teacher, and his attractive next door neighbors who do not want to be seen with him when their more "acceptable friends" come to play. Lincoln's redemptive experience comes in a theater when an astonished white man, recoiling from Lincoln, accidentally blurts to him that he is indeed the "real thing." Those words, the "real thing," bewilder the boy at first, but gradually he is reassured; in the words of the poem:

> When he was hurt, too much
> stared at--
> too much
> left alone--he
> thought about that. He told himself
> "After all, I'm
> the real thing."
>
> It comforted him.

"Elegy in a Rainbow" (*Beckonings*) seems to say that the nature of "the Black Nation," or simply of blackness, is a mystery rational analysis would kill. Like thoughts of Christmas to a child, Blackness must be treated as a special possession "that no one else can see." Clearly, some individuals are denied initiation into the mystery. Possibly it is Afro-Americans alone who can know the truth, or it is also possible that the truth is known only by individuals who can know it by virtue of their intuition.

The following works, as well as some others, reveal Brooks' unequivocal belief that a struggle of a violent nature is going on and will continue. She has throughout her career, of course, been aware of the full range of racial conflicts and other social evils, and these awarenesses are evident in her poems. That the response to such conditions would have to be violent, however, is a more recent opinion, appearing in unequivocal terms in the mid-1960's. Partially accounting for the change, as Dudley Randall has written, was "the influence of her association with militant young Chicago South Side writers."[6] In fact, Brooks knew or believed in 1969 that her future poems would "include [individuals] who do not think they're thinking about the great fight that's going on," and that is of major importance in a short poem with a long title in *Beckonings*, "Five Men Against the Theme." "Five Men" condemns as a class all who are passive or exploitative in response to the "warfare" going on; conversely, it praises men with the strength and determination to act. From *Beckonings*, the poem "The Boy Died in My Alley" portrays an individual who tried to pretend he did not see the horrors which occurred all around him. The poem reveals a mind futilely attempting to ignore what the "red floor" of the alley plainly states. Perhaps "The Boy Died in My Alley" is somewhat optimistic in the sense that, like the narrator of the poem, others also will come to accept the truth and act accordingly.

"Young Africans" (*Family Pictures*) declares that change will require violence and that the violence will be necessary to compel everyone who would prefer not to face the "Blacktime":

> Taking Today (to jerk it out of joint)
> the hardheroic maim the
> leechlike-as-usual who use,
> adhere to, carp, and harm.
>
> And they await,
> across the Changes and the spiraling dead,
> our black revival, our black vinegar,
> our hands, and our hot blood.

Passivity, the poem says, is "harm"; there is no equivocation. True heroes, called "flowers," must be militant and violent:

> If there are flowers flowers
> must come out to the road.
> Rowdy!--
> knowing where wheels and people are,

---

[6]"Black Poetry," in Addison Grayle, Jr., ed., *Black Expression* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), p. 114.

knowing where whips and screams are,
knowing where deaths are, where the kind kills are.

As in *Beckonings*, the final poem in *Family Pictures*, which is entitled "Speech to the Young," appeals to youth to scorn humiliating compromises. She urges young people to live their lives even while fully participating in bringing about the necessary changes, just as in an earlier poem the narrator-mother had commanded her son to "Go down the street." Since "Boys. Black." comments significantly upon all her major themes in the 1970's, it seems appropriate to examine it in detail. Urging young Afro-Americans to announce the beginning of a new age, the poem begins:

Boys. Black. Black Boys.
Be brave to battle for your breath and bread.
Your heads hold clocks that strike the new time of day.
Your hearts are
legislating Summer Weather now.
Cancel Winter.

(Parenthetically, we might simply note the apparent allusion to Shelley's famous remark that poets are the true legislators of the world.) From actions which will probably be violent, the narrator derives some hope in the belief "there's fertile ground beneath the pseudo-ice."

"Afrika"--always spelled with a "k"--is held out as an essential inspirational source, even if to the young men Afrika had been little more than a name on a map.

Boys, in all your Turning and your Churnings,
remember Afrika.
Call your singing and your bringing,
your pulse, your ultimate booming in
the not-so-narrow temples of your Power--
call all that, that is your Poem, AFRIKA.
Although you know
so little of that long leaplanguid land,
our tiny union
is the dwarfmagnificent.
Is the busy simple thing.

Like Countee Cullen in "Heritage," Brooks believes that even if the connection between Afrika and Afro-Americans seems insignificant--a "tiny union"--yet it is real and important: "the dwarfmagnificent."

Brooks goes on to state that the young men should "Enact our inward law." That phrase, "inward law," is explicit evidence Brooks is relying upon a Black mystique, asserting without explaining a racial quality. Living, as the poem says, "In the precincts of a nightmare," the young can feel confident that change, however achieved, will at least not be worse than present conditions. And at this point in the poem, the young men are urged "to be with your sisters" in the work.

The next section of the poem deals with several threats to their success, and the narrator duly identifies each threat and offers a possible response. They are told to beware of false leaders:

Because
the eyeless Leaders flutter, tilt, and fail.
The followers falter, peculiar, eyeless too.

After warning against false leaders, Brooks informs them that religious scruples should not impede the struggle. The passage is somewhat difficult, perhaps more abstract than it had to be (even if the poem is subtitled "a preachment"). Brooks seems to say that Black youth must act in the knowledge that there are no absolutes, no certainties. Here are the lines in the poem urging the young to use "Force":

whether
God is a Thorough and a There,
or a mad child,
playing
with a floorful of toys,
mashing
whatwhen he will. Force, whether
God is spent pulse, capricious, or a yet-to-come.

Formal religious doctrine, these lines declare, must be secondary in the struggle, because whether God exists or not, whether God is evil or not, whether God has died or not yet come, are all beside the point.

Two further cautionings follow. The first probably contains an allusion to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., more particularly suggesting his influence was neutralized, as any reform movement can become nothing more than what the poem calls an "imitation coronation."

And boys,
young brothers, young brothers--
beware the imitation coronations.
Beware
the courteous paper of kingly compliments.

The final snares they are warned against are the "easy griefs." They are told it is not enough to shout "ATTICA" in the streets and then go running home to watch "Gunsmoke."

"Boys. Black." concludes with lines which declare unashamedly that love and faith have motivated the poet to speak, as indeed love and faith must also be their guidng impulses:

I tell you
I love You
and I trust You.
Take my Faith
Make of my Faith an engine.
Make of my Faith
a Black Star. I am Beckoning.

Even though the "Black Star" probably was intended to revive memories of Marcus Garvey, Brooks modifies the "Black Star" into a symbol not of material wealth or of a way back to Africa, but of spiritual faith in the capacity of the young to be the agent of their own salvation.

DEFINE . . . THE WHIRLWIND; IN THE MECCA--URBAN SETTING, SHIFTING NARRATOR AND REDEMPTIVE VISION*

R. BAXTER MILLER

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

For twenty-three years, Gwendolyn Brooks tried to write *In the Mecca* (1968). *Street in Bronzeville* (1945) was the beginning of her portraits of the Black community; *Annie Allen* (1949), *Maud Martha* (1953), and *Bean Eaters* (1960) continued this process. But these attempts did not fulfill her hidden purpose: to write a Black epic. Such a work would rank with the classics; it would portray a narrator's journey, the obstacles she encountered, and her final vision of victory.

Brooks tried first in the title poem of *Annie Allen* and failed. Since the style was too lofty for the theme, an unintentional mock epic resulted. She had heeded the critics too carefully. Their requests had led her to substitute Germanic mythology for the Black folk life which she knew. If Latin and Greek diction replaced the Black vernacular, the images that could make her epic live left with the folk voice.

Before Brooks attempted an epic again, she wrote *Maud Martha*. In this autobiographical novel, Brooks practiced the technique of focusing upon the life of one woman and the characters and problems which she encountered. She tested, too, her skill for creating an undramatized narrator--the fictional self, conceived in the work, which can enter characters' minds or withdraw into objectivity.[1] Her next book, *The Bean Eaters* (1960), contained some good poems of occasion, especially those concerning the fifties; yet few of these verses demonstrated her rhetorical power and thematic depth. They do not rival the fine sequences of sonnets that end her first two volumes.

Once again Brooks wanted to attempt a long poem. Could free verse and ballad succeed where rhyme royal and sonnet had not? The next book would tell. A year after its publication (1969), George Starvros, an interviewer for *Contemporary Literature*, would question: "Let me ask you about the character in your poetry and in your novel *Maud Martha*. *In the Mecca*, your most recent volume, portrays life in a large city building. *A Street in Bronzeville* gave similar vignettes of people in the city. The same, I think, can be said of all your work." Brooks

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*A version of this essay appeared in *Obsidian*, Vol. IV (1978), pp. 19-31.

[1]See Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 149-63, 211-34.

replied, "It's a fascination of mine to write about ghetto people there."[2] One can evaluate her success in this effort, first in light of the Anglo-American tradition of poetry, next in the paradox of the American Dream, and finally in some skillful uses of technique such as Christian myth, parody, and varying distance of narration. *Mecca* is a most complex and intriguing book; it seeks to balance the sordid realities of urban life with an imaginative process of reconciliation and redemption.

Before an explication of the title poem, one needs to know some background. In her interview with Starvros, Brooks comments:

> . . . when I was nineteen and had just gotten out of junior college, I went to the Illinois State Employment Service to get a job. They sent me to the Mecca building to a spiritual advisor, and he had a fantastic practice; lucrative. He had us bottling up medicine as well as answering letters. Not real medicine but love charms and stuff like that he called it, and delivered it through the building. . . .[3]

Brooks' explanation here closely correlates with the description of Mecca that appears on the back of her title page:

> . . . a great gray hulk of brick, four stories high, topped by an ungainly smokestack, ancient and enormous, filling half of the block north of Thirty-Fourth Street between State and Dearborn . . . the Mecca building is U-shaped. The dirt courtyard is littered with newspapers and cans, milk cartons and broken glass . . . Iron fire escapes run up the building's face and ladders reach from them to the roof. There are four main entrances, two on Dearborn and two on State Street. At each is a gray stone and threshold and over each is carved "The Mecca." (The Mecca was constructed in 1891, a splendid palace, or showplace of Chicago.) . . .[4]

The date of 1891 is significant, since it designates the post-Darwinian world. In American history, industrialization had ended the dream of an agrarian world. The Chicago Mecca, in this light, becomes ironic when one considers the other Mecca, the holiest city of Islam and birthplace of Mohammed. Having wanted to write two thousand lines, Brooks settled for slightly more than eight hundred.[5] She says:

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[2]See George E. Kent, "The Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks," *Black World*, Part I, (September 1971), pp. 30-43. Kent writes: "The depth of her responsiveness and her range of poetic resources make her one of the most distinguished poets to appear in America during the 20th century."

[3]George Starvros, "Interview with Gwendolyn Brooks," in Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report from Part One* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), p. 162. Reprinted from *Contemporary Literature* (March 28, 1969).

[4]Gwendolyn Brooks, *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). All citations of the text come from this edition, unless otherwise noted.

[5]Gwendolyn Brooks, "Work Proposed for 'In the Mecca,'" *Report from Part One*, p. 189.

> This poem will not be a statistical report. I'm interested in a certain detachment, incisiveness. I wish to present a large variety of personalities against a mosaic of clarity, affairs, recognizing that the *grimmest* of these is likely to have a streak or two streaks of sun.[6]

The intention is to expand a dramatization of individual scene into universal type so as "to touch every note in the life of this block-long block-wide building would be to capsulize the gist of black humanity in general."[7]

The simple plot and structure of *Mecca* present an urban setting. For convenience one can divide the narrative into three sections. Part I (lines 1-254) sets forth the return home from work of Mrs. Sallie Smith, mother of nine. The focus here is on the neighbors that she encounters and on the characterizations of her children. In the second part (lines 254-406), the shortest, the woman notices that Pepita, one of her girls, is missing. This observation prompts the first search through the tenement and allows for further characterization and biblical parody. Section II also concerns the paradox of American myth. The longest section is Part III (lines 407-812), which constitutes almost half of the verse. Here the police retrace the Smiths' search. Because of its themes and styles, Part III is probably the richest. Militant declarations, interracial lovemaking, rhetorical questions, and Christian myth all contribute to its power and effect. The poem ends with the discovery of Pepita's corpse under the bed of Jamaican Edward.

In the Mecca represents opposite strains of the Anglo-American tradition. One finds a naturalistic version of Walt Whitman by way of the industrial age and the redemptive, if frustrated, potential that characterizes the world of T. S. Eliot. But these influences work so that the peculiarities of Black American experience transform them into a new and creative vision. By adapting to the social forces of the sixties, the poet uses a new milieu. Her canvas is a most demanding time in American history.

Mary Melodie, one of Mrs. Sallie's daughters, shows this turmoil. She likes "roaches,/and pities the gray rat." To her, headlines are "secondary," even though she knows that "blood runs like a ragged wound through the ancient flesh of the land" (line 156, China). The imagery implies the naturalism of Richard Wright and others, for to such writers people are manipulated by forces beyond their control. Yet Brooks' point is not that life is crushed inevitably; it is, rather, that even the most lowly insect is sacred. Such a proposition returns a reader to Emerson's belief that each individual reflects all Being. It leads similarly to Whitman's indebted idea: a leaf of grass indicates Eternal Reality. In her description of Mary Melodie, the narrator disorients the reader.[8] Although the imagery indicates naturalism, the statement suggests transcendentalism. To Mary, the deaths of roaches signify what pervades all Life. The naturalism after 1850 tempers the romantic vision, when the undramatized narrator withdraws from Mary's mind:

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[6]*Ibid.*

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 190.

[8]Part of my thinking about Brooks as a poet who disorients the reader is indebted to Hortense Spillers, "Gwendolyn the Terrible," a seminar paper for the MLA Convention, December 1975.

> Trapped in his privacy of pain
> the worried rat expires,
> and smashed in the grind of a rapid heel
> last night's roaches lie. (lines 165-68)

This suggestion of the post-Darwinian universe reinforces the date of 1891 at the back of the title page. Similarly it recalls the imagery that helps to depict Prophet Williams, an "engine/of candid steel hugging combustibles" (lines 33-34). Mrs. Sallie describes three of her children--Emmett, Cap, and Casey:

> skin wiped over bones
> for lack of chub and chocolate
> and ice-cream cones,
> for lack of English muffins
> and boysenberry jam. (lines 216-20)

The ensuing question is a twentieth century one and could well suit the "Waste Land": "What shall their redeemer be?" (line 221). That Brooks' version has a concrete setting in Chicago adds to the intensity of her effect.

The poverty of the three children mentioned above is as real in the second part as in the first. Here the levels of the narrator's dramatization in verse move from the particular to the general: personal, racial, urban, and human. By giving a setting of the city, the narrator implies a need for the pastoral, since the human mind conceives by contrasts. It is striking, indeed, to find in her compressed style, resembling that of Pound and Eliot, the truth of Thomas Gray! Still it was this eighteenth century poet of graveyards who wrote once on this theme of death of the human potential and the genius that can redeem reality.

> And they [the children] are constrained. All are constrained
> upon fright and remorse and their stomachs . . .
> are rags of grit. (lines 284-88)
> . . .
> many flowers start, choke, reach up,
> want help, get it, do not get it,
> rally bloom, or die on the wasting vine. (lines 292-94)

From the narrator's observation, the plot reverts to a drama of poetry where Mrs. Salley performs the lead. The image and tone suggest both the Old Testament and the folk ballad, "No More Auction Block." In the first, one finds an emphasis on lost children; in the second, there is an implication of Black death, which is archetypal. The present only foreshadows Pepita's end: "One of my children is gone" (line 295).

That Don Lee, a poet of the sixties, appears in *Mecca* recreates him as a man of the imaginative world as well as a man of history. The Lee in the poem lives at the midpoint between mimesis and reality. He wants " . . . not a various America . . . a new nation/under nothing" (lines 489-92). One must remember that this Lee is a tenant in the building described, as are all other characters. Should the reader elect to jump from the mimetic world to the historical one, he may get into trouble. Like the real Lee (Madhubuti), he may find that only one portrait in the poem is truly distinguished:[9]

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[9]Don L. Lee, "Gwendolyn Brooks: Beyond the Wordmaker--The Making of an African Poet," *Report from Part One*, p. 22.

> Way-Out Morgan is collecting guns
> in a tiny fourth-floor room.
> He is not hungry, even, though skillfully lean.
> He flourishes, ever, on porridge or pat bean
> pudding or wiener soup-fills fearsomely
> on visions of Death to-the-Hordes-of-the White Man. (lines 709-14)

Madhubuti, of course, has his own followers and ideology. Here, however, the latter spoils his opportunity to appreciate fully the range of Gwendolyn Brooks. She does depict Morgan with the imagery and power necessary to make him real. But she also portrays John Tom (no incidental name), St. Julia Jones, and others who have different beliefs. All live in this decaying city; only through imagination can the reader constantly sustain their opposing visions. But in *Mecca* sustentation is all.

The final two hundred lines show once more the influence of Eliot. The refrain, in particular, indicates a sordid world that has profaned what once was sacred: "How many care Pepita?" (lines 614, 666; slight variation, 683). The prostitutes and harlots are unconcerned, as the phallic imagery shows: "the obscene gruntings/the dull outwittings/the flabby semi-rhythmic shufflings" (lines 629-31). Equally obscene are those people, young or old, who make vulgar love. Preoccupied with their own lives, past and present, the characters lack any answers, and the narrator will have to give her own. These inhabitants of the city can no more acknowledge the sacredness of procreation than Alfred, the confused poet, can see that divinity is already within him:

> Hush.
> An agitation in the bush.
> Occulded trees.
> Mad life heralding the blue heat of God
> snickers in a corner of the west windowsill. (lines 645-49)

Other characters inhabit this *Mecca*, Brooks' wasteland, although they number too many to receive more than passing attention. Among them are: Dakara, the reader of *Vogue*; Aunt Tippie and Zombie Bell, who are undramatized; Mr. Kelly, the beggar with long gray hair; Gas Cady, a grave robber; the janitor, a political person; Queenie King, an "old poem silvering in the noise"; and Wallace Williams, proclaimer of his virility. To all, the narrator's answer to the rhetorical question applies equally: "these little care, Pepita, what befalls a/nullified saint or forfeiture" (or child) (lines 683-84).

Set against this background, the description of Alfred becomes particularly significant, for it suggests that the world has passed from hope to hopelessness. For his authorities, Alfred cites Baudelaire, Browning, and Neruda, but his best trick is to parody Whitman. To affirm the redemptive potential of the human spirit, the nineteenth century poet wrote" "Good-bye and hail! my fancy." To deprive humankind of such belief, Alfred expresses the opposite: "*Farewell*, and *Hail*! Until farewell again" (line 697). Tension separates the literary vision of the past from that of the present.

Other observations show that this is less the world of Thomas Gray and Walt Whitman than that of T. S. Eliot. Consider Aunt Dill, who wears Tabu perfume. Little Papa, probably her husband, has been dead for nine years, and all of her children were stillbirths. As a woman who loves God, she initially reminds the reader of St. Julia. More importantly, she illustrates the paradox that Pepita

faced: to grow into a woman who should be shunned or to die in the innocence of youth. Dill

> Is not
> true-child-of God for are we ever to
> be children? are we never to mature,
> be lovely lovely? be soft Woman
> rounded and darling . . . almost caressable . . .
> and certainly wearing *Tabu* in the name of the Lord. (lines 774-79)

Usually ambivalent in attitude, Alfred admits to his hatred of Mecca when he confesses:

> something, something in Mecca
> continues to call! Substanceless
> . . .
> an essential sanity black and electric
> builds to a reportage and redemption
> . . .
> A material collapse
> that is Construction. (lines 785-93)

From Alfred, however, one will hardly get the opinion of the undramatized narrator or the implied author. Since the beginning, she has portrayed him as a weak man and an inadequate intellectual. Pepita, on the contrary, is a true poet, just as Alfred is a false one. Despite her youth, she responded to life with sincerity and sensitivity. "'I touch'--she said once--'petals of a rose./A silky feeling through me goes'" (lines 808-09). For a brief moment the reader receives an alternative vision set against the urban chaos of squalor and hopelessness.

This urban setting reveals the paradox of the American dream. At the beginning, the narrator shifts the focus from her reader to a persona. By combining the imperative and the expository, the verse commences: "Sit where the light corrupts your face./Mies Van der Rohe retires from grace./And the fair fables fall" (lines 1-3). Thomas Earl, one of Mrs. Sallie's children, loves an American folk figure. In tone, however, the narrator questions the validity of John Chapman, now transformed into an American legend. She does not mention Mecca, Saudi Arabia, but its reputation for uncultivability suits well the imagery and myth:

> It is hard to be Johnny Appleseed.
> The ground shudders.
> The ground springs up;
> hits you with gnarls and rust,
> derangement and fever, or blare and clerical treasons. (lines 210-14)

Characterizations in the narrative parody American myth. Melody Mary, Thomas Earl, and Briggs have "gangs rats appleseed" (line 275). Examine each word within the quotation mark, first as an entity and then as a whole. Each of the first two images implies the urban experience, but the last suggests the frontier. The collectivity of the line leaves the reader with two questions. Is the idea that "gangs" or "rats," as social reality, corrupt myth and dream, coupled with "appleseed," beyond recognition? Or can myth, "appleseed," redeem the ghetto from "gangs" and "rats"? By their very disjunction such inquiries mislead, for the purpose here is to create not a separation of perspectives, but a unity composed of alternative points of view.

One must measure American ideals against the social reality of *Mecca*. In one scene, Emmet, a daughter of Mrs. Sallie, seizes the telephone from John Tom. Considering various levels of meaning, this incident becomes complex. In a fine word play on time and the American Dream, the narrator recreates the folk legend of the submissive Black: "Despite the terror and the derivation,/despite the not *avuncular* frontier,/John Tom, twice forty in 420, claims/Life sits or blazes in this Mecca" (emphasis added, lines 401-04). When the narrator intervenes, Tom has provoked already the "calm and dalliance" of law (line 407). On a second level, the narrator unintentionally becomes ambiguous. An exclamation that concerns the size of Pepita results in the American Dream, ironically rendered. The twist is that one can be small in thoughts as well as in dimensions: "How shall the Law allow for *littleness*!/How shall the Law enchief the chapters of/wee brown-black chime, we brown-black chastity" (emphasis added, lines 407-10). With the arrival of the impersonal policemen (line 41) begins a second trip through the Mecca. This one ends in the discovery of the dead child (line 801). The officers and the charactor Amos have different ideologies, since the latter is a bitter militant. He personifies America with: "Bathe her in her beautiful blood" (line 523).

In the Mecca portrays the urban scene through a straight or ironic use of Christian myth and parody. Throughout *Mecca*, the verse changes point of view between the narrator and her characters. The situation of Briggs, another of Mrs. Sallie's children, reworks a central motif in *Maud Martha*: at some point human concern passes from social reality--a difficult concept with which to deal--to religion and finally to forgetfulness. The narrator first enters into the character's mind and then withdraws. In the initial description of the young man there comes ironic detachment. After we have learned about his problems with the gangs in his neighborhood, the vision comes from within: "Immunity is forfeit, love/is luggage, hope is heresy" (lines 175-76). The narrator, nevertheless, can step back from the character and speak directly; she can brilliantly explain human psychology: " . . . there is a central height in pity/past which man's hand and sympathy cannot go" (lines 181-82).

Reviewing the first 254 lines of the poem shows that they have described, first, Mrs. Sallie's return home; second, her children; and third, Alfred, the neurotic artist. But line 255 begins the inciting incident, which both the poem and its reader must resolve. Where is Pepita, Sallie's ninth and missing child? The abrupt shift from the narrator's heightened style shocks when Sallie's children reply emphatically in the Black vernacular: "'Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er/Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er'" (lines 266-67).[10]

Like most characters in *Mecca*, Loam Norton worries more about his own concerns than about Mrs. Sallie's daughter. He remembers Belsen and Dachau, possibly his own children. But in a parody of the Twenty-Third Psalm, the narrator interrupts and holds the stage:

> The Lord was their shepherd
> Yet did they want.
> Joyfully, would they have lain in jungles or pastures,
> walked beside waters. Their gaunt
> souls were not restored, their souls were banished.
> . . .

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[10]See George E. Kent, "The Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks," Part II, *Black World* (October 1971), pp. 36-48, 66-70.

> Goodness and mercy should follow them
> all the days of their death. (lines 318-30)

For her character St. Julia Jones, the narrator parodied with equal fidelity the same passage. There the effect was less a religious cynicism than a folk joy. Sallie Smith saw Julia, who asked:

> "Isn't our Lord the greatest to the brim?
> The light of my life. And I lie late
> past the still pastures. And meadows. He's the comfort
> and wine and piccalilli for my soul.
> He hunts me up the coffee for my cup.
> O how I love that Lord." (lines 20-26)

When Alfred dreams of being a red bush "In the West Virginia autumn," the image implies the appearance of the Lord to Moses (Exodus 2:3). The narrator knows that man, by being alive, is already divine; Alfred doubts: " . . . the bush does not know that it flames" (line 511). The force of the ending comes from a repetition of this tone. Jamaican Edward "thrice denies any involvement with Pepita" (line 798), just as the Peter of the New Testament (St. Matthew 26:4) refuses to acknowledge Christ. The girl lies beneath Edward's cot in the dust. Despite differences in sex and age, she resembles Jesus.

If the title poem, Part I of *Mecca*, shows the callousness of the people in the ghetto, Part II, "After Mecca," offers a corrective or redeeming vision.[11] Here Brooks takes historical figures from the sixties and elevates them to a level of myth where they transcend life.[12] First she describes Medgar Evers, the Civil Rights leader assassinated in 1963. Never settling for a mere recording of history, she transforms fact into a tercet of prophecy: "Roaring no rapt arise-ye to the dead, he/leaned across tomorrow. People said that/he was holding clean globes in his hands" (lines 14-16). In this section, Brooks goes beyond description to symbolism. She reshapes history to make it reflect social vision, created form, and human imagination. Next she portrays Malcolm X, the leader slain in 1965. The emphasis, however, should fall not upon history alone, but upon Malcolm's role as a political magician. Since the beginning of the volume, such a type of human being has evolved. An artist, like a magician, seeks to create a new order of reality, although the former wants to change the physical world and the latter to institute an imaginative one. By the power of words, the writer seeks to mesmerize her reader with the spell of form. Alfred was a poet, if not a great one; by her life and death, Pepita was more exemplary. The narrator of the verse *Mecca* was, too, for only in her role as seer and harmonizer did she find irony and avoid despair. To envision Malcolm, one must reconstruct the many types that precede: word-maker, ironist, visionary, and prophet:

> in a soft and fundamental hour
> a sorcery devout and vertical
> beguiled the world.

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[11]For the only other article, to my knowledge, focusing on the volume as a whole, see William Hansell, "Gwendolyn Brooks' 'In the Mecca,' A Rebirth into Blackness," *Negro American Literature Forum*, 8 (Summer 1974), pp. 199-207.

[12]To discriminate among myth, romance, and realism, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: University Press), pp. 33-52.

He opened us--
Who was a key
who was a man. (lines 8-13)

At the end of *Mecca*, redemptive vision depends upon two poems: "The Sermon on the Warpland" and "The Second Sermon on the Warpland" (hereafter "Second Sermon"). The first demonstrates Brooks' ability to portray reality initially from one point of view and then from another, which clarifies the original. The poet reverts to her habit of coining words, as necessary. What does "Warpland" mean? If the word "Sermon" parodies Christ's speech on the Mount, "Warpland" implies not geographical place, but military design--a "war planned." Yet the several strengths, the speakers in the verse, express the opposite yearnings of the human spirit: "Say that our Something is doublepod contains/seeds for the coming hell and health together" (lines 6-7). The voice of a Black militant, shortly afterwards, recalls Amos or Way-Out-Morgan in the title poem. But in this world of pervasive irony and contradiction, speech must end in an oxymoron.

Prepare to meet
(sisters brothers) the harsh and terrible weather;
the pains;
the bruising; the collapse of bestials, idols.
. . .
the seasoning of the perilously sweet!
the health. The heralding of the *clear obscure*! (emphasis added, lines 8-14)

To this voice, Brooks adds a corrective or balancing resonance. Perhaps her greatest gift is a talent for creating opposite viewpoints within the same poetic world. With equal adeptness she can imagine the militant and renew the meaning of Christ's words to His disciple, Peter (St. Matthew 16, 18). In both instances she stresses universality within the framework of the Black American experience. To one who has read *Mecca* as an objective correlative, the narrator here becomes Pepita, resurrected and grown into womanhood. The figure is older and maternal:

"Build now your church, my brothers, sisters. Build.
. . .
Build with lithe love. With love like lion eyes.
With love like morningrise.
With love like black, our black--
luminously indiscreet;
complete; continuous." (lines 15-21)

Immediately following this poem, "Second Sermon" results in a final triumph for the human imagination: "This is the urgency Live:/and have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind" (lines 1-2). The verse has four parts. The first gives the theme quoted last; the second emphasizes the need to give form, to "stylize the flawed utility" (line 2). In the third division one discovers the chaos against which the imagination conceives. At the end (IV) comes a description of Big Bessie, who stands in the wild weed.

What a metaphor that whirlwind is! From it, one can look at various angles and see diverse personalities: the arrogantly indifferent, inhumanely callous, and hopelessly contemplative. The narrator's voice reaches back to the end of *Annie Allen*. There, for the first time in Brooks' verse, a speaker possessed some intuitive truth which neither the characters in the poem nor the readers outside

fully understood. The observer here is not a well-rounded character; she is, rather, the Imaginative Mind that resolves disparities:

> Not the easy man, who rides above them all,
> not the jumbo brigand,
> not the pet bird of poets, that sweetest sonnet,
> shall straddle the whirlwind.
> Nevertheless, live. (2, lines 8-12)

Parts III and IV show that imaginative vision can save the listeners in the world of Mecca. By perceiving this world in its contradictions and ironies, the observer has ordered chaos. Is this the final paradox?

> All about are cold places,
> all about are the pushmen, and jeopardy, theft--
> all about are the stormers and scramblers but
> . . .
> Live and go out
> Define and
> medicate the whirlwind.

The noblest virtue of Big Bessie, the woman who concludes the volume, is imagination. Without disillusionment, she can look at life and survive. Brooks owes part of the imagery to Langston Hughes' Semple: "Big Bessie's *feet* hurt like nobody's business,/but she stands--bigly--under the unruly scrutiny, stands in the/wild weed" (emphasis added, lines 30-32). By vision and endurance, the Big Bessies can redeem the city in which Pepitas are slain.

For twenty-three years, Gwendolyn Brooks had sought this balance of vision. In *Street in Bronzeville* (1945), she had been a poet of the unheroic.[13] But the folk religion lingered. It manifested itself at the end of *Annie Allen* (1949), subsided in *Maud Martha* (1953) and *Bean Eaters* (1960), only to reappear more intensely in *Mecca*. By then she had practiced ironic detachment and varying distances of narration. Drawing upon Christian myth and different strains of Anglo-American poetry helped her to enrich an epic in which the narrator is heroine. From a certain vision of Chicago as Waste Land, Brooks moved to a double perspective of destruction and creation; from Pound and Eliot, her literary journey led back to Whitman. But the reason is not that Whitman is especially important. It is only that he is romantic in some way that Black folk are: rebelling against constraint, hoping from the depths of an industrial age. If the city corrupts the romantic vision, does it matter? Revealing the paradox of the American Dream suffices, for to show one's reader paradise is not the only way to save his soul.

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[13]Arthur P. Davis, "Gwendolyn Brooks: Poet of the Unheroic," *CLA Journal*, 7 (December 1962), pp. 114-25.

BEYOND SOCIOLOGY? URBAN EXPERIENCE IN THE NOVELS OF JAMES BALDWIN

JAMES B. VOPAT

CARROLL COLLEGE

WAUKESHA, WISCONSIN

In his now famous and infamous 1949 essay entitled "Everybody's Protest Novel,"[1] James Baldwin warns against the reductive "sentimentality" inherent in social protest fiction. What *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Native Son* share, Baldwin argues, is an absence of human complexity, both in terms of thematic conception and character development. Stowe and Wright confine their artistic vision into the narrow parameters of "formula" and "categorization"--their novels "diminish" rather than enlarge human experience. The authentic novelist, Baldwin maintains, using a religious metaphor which would probably have appealed more to Stowe than to Wright, is committed not to category but to "the power of revelation" (*Notes*, p. 11). The authentic novelist has the passion and courage to "journey toward a more vast reality which must take precedence over all claims." In short, "literature and sociology are not one and the same" (*Notes*, p. 14).

For Baldwin, literature cannot serve sociology, but that is not to say that his literature fails to explore it. As a spokesman for modern American consciousness, Baldwin examines the dynamics of environmental pressures on the self and notes the paradoxical consequences of deep personal loneliness in the midst of urban congestion. "If one was never . . . left alone in New York," he writes in *Another Country*, "one had, still, to fight very hard in order not to perish of loneliness."[2] He is well aware of the cost of urban survival, and especially how New York City, "that city which the people from heaven have made their home" (*Another*, p. 436), testifies to the bankruptcy of the American Dream. As one of the most prolific writers in the Black literary tradition, Baldwin is further concerned with the compounding effects of racism in an already alienating urban environment; that is, the double trauma of being Black and urban. As Elizabeth realizes in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*:

> There was not, after all, a great difference between the world of the North and that of the South which she had fled; there was only this difference: the North promised more. And this similarity: what it

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[1]James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Bantam, 1955). All further references occur within the body of the essay as *Notes*.

[2]James Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Dial Press, 1962), p. 230. All further references will occur within the body of the essay as *Another*.

> promised it did not give, and what it gave, at length and grudgingly with one hand, it took back with the other.[3]

To be Black and urban is to be victimized by a very complex confidence game indeed. The narrator of "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" observes that "I was scared in Alabama, but I almost went crazy in New York."[4]

Baldwin's urban world is, at times, conveyed through images familiar to readers of the modern protest novel: New York is "hell,"[5] the "kingdom of the blind" (*If Beale*, p. 27), the "city of destruction" (*Go Tell*, p. 157), the "battlefield" (*Another*, p. 231), the "city stricken by the plague."[6] The predominant image is the latter, and Baldwin repeats it with a certain haunting effectiveness.[7] In fact, the image of the plague itself embodies a type of ongoing urban fatality. There is, Tish sadly observes towards the beginning of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, a

> . . . death waiting to overtake the children of our age. Though the death took many forms, though people died early in many different ways, the death itself was very simple and the cause was simple too: as simple as a plague: the kids had been told that they weren't worth shit and everything they saw around them proved it. They struggled, they struggled, but they fell, like flies, and they congregated on the garbage heaps of their lives, like flies. (*If Beale*, p. 36)

The power of the image does not, as one might expect from Baldwin's earlier writings, derive from the Old Testament tradition of an angry God's retribution. Instead, the image recites an inevitable spiral of contamination. The kids are judged as worthless, the environment reinforces the judgment, the kids then lose hope and "fall," thus proving the judgment correct. Lives become "garbage heaps," and the kids become "flies" feeding off of their own contamination, unable to escape the irresistible pull of their own decay.

There is a difference between conveying experience through the concrete force of things and through the more abstract force of figure of speech. Thus in the above quotation from *If Beale Street Could Talk*, "garbage heaps" is not seen as a physical fact as much as it is a metaphoric concept. It is an essential distinction, for in his novels Baldwin relies more on figurative patterns than on an

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[3]James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Dell, 1953), p. 163. All further references will occur within the body of the essay as *Go Tell*.

[4]James Baldwin, "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: Dial Press, 1965), p. 172. All further references will occur within the body of the essay as *Going*.

[5]James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Dial Press, 1974), p. 9. All further references will occur within the body of the essay as *If Beale*.

[6]James Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (New York: Dial Press, 1968), p. 478. All further references will occur within the body of the essay as *Tell Me*.

[7]See *Another Country*, pp. 231, 426; *If Beale Street Could Talk*, p. 199; *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, pp. 202, 478.

accumulation of concrete details in order to convey his urban vision. This perhaps explains the disappointment of critics in the relative vague nature of this vision. As David R. Weimer states: "Baldwin refuses . . . to make the urban environment really substantial."[8] Yet the dynamics behind Baldwin's metaphoric patterns often echo the "substantial" determinism of the modern protest novel: victimization is surely one of the truths of urban experience. Baldwin's metaphor for this victimization is the narrow room. In his 1948 essay, "The Harlem Ghetto," he writes that "all of Harlem is pervaded by a sense of congestion, rather like an insistent, maddening, claustrophobic pounding in the skull that comes from trying to breathe in a very small room with all the windows shut" (*Notes*, p. 47). For Baldwin the demarcations between environment and psyche are obscure, often nonexistent. As in the quotation from "The Harlem Ghetto," physical congestion becomes a mental crowding, social forces become inner pressures. The demarcations only involve intensity. Just as the small room itself intensifies the overall social and moral congestion beyond the windows, so the mind intensifies the "sense of congestion" into a "maddening, claustrophobic pounding in the skull." And there is no escape; the attempt to shut tight the windows only makes it more difficult to breathe, only makes the room more small.

How often Baldwin employs variations of this room image in order to convey the sense of individual entrapment. In a very deliberate way he wants his readers to see that, like Peter in "Previous Condition," Blacks live in a series of "furnished rooms . . . the kind of room that defeated you" (*Going*, p. 84). Clearly the "defeat" is not limited to Blacks; Giovanni's room is also "claustrophobic,"[9] and Leona of *Another Country* finishes out her life sitting "somewhere in Georgia, staring at the walls of a narrow room; and she would remain there forever" (*Another*, p. 71). Yet the closing in of urban defeat is felt most profoundly in the lives of Baldwin's Black characters. Thus John Grimes, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, awakens on the morning of his fourteenth birthday into a "room . . . narrow and dirty; nothing could alter its dimensions, no labor could ever make it clean" (*Go Tell*, p. 21). For John, such a beginning seems to be also the end; the negatives in the description are too absolute. John himself feels a spiritual rebirth at the conclusion of the novel, a sense that "the storm is over" and that the avenue, like himself, "lay changed under Heaven, exhausted and clean and new. Not again, forever, could it return to the avenue it once had been" (*Go Tell*, p. 215). Yet certain truths abide, and one has the final sense of impending doom, for the "houses" on the avenue "were there as they had been; the windows like a thousand, blinded eyes" (*Go Tell*, p. 216), and already John's "saving" is past tense: "No matter what anyone says," he pleads to Elisha, "you remember--please remember--I was saved" (*Go Tell*, p. 200). His immediate and, one feels, ultimate destination ("I'm coming. I'm on my way") is but a retreat back into confinement, into the "long shadows of the hall" (*Go Tell*, p. 221).

While there is some question about the exact nature of John's fate[10]--the ambulance encroaching into the "silence" of the novel's conclusion "raced to carry someone to healing, or to death" (*Go Tell*, p. 211)--no such ambiguity surrounds

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[8]David R. Weimer, *The City as Metaphor* (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 146.

[9]James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (New York: Dial Press, 1956), p. 96.

[10]George E. Kent, "Baldwin and the Problem of Being," *CLA Journal*, 7, No. 3 (1964), pp. 202-14.

Rufus' suicide at the end of the first chapter of *Another Country*. As Rufus throws himself from the George Washington Bridge into the void--"there was nothing around him, only the wind" (*Another*, p. 88)--he ironically completes and sarcastically answers John's final words in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: "All right, you mother-fucking bastard, I'm coming to you" (*Another*, p. 88). Critics such as Robert A. Bone have observed how initially, both in his anger and in his treatment of women, Rufus resembles Bigger Thomas,[11] and, undoubtedly, with Rufus Baldwin is utilizing the conventions of everyone's protest novel. It should, however, be quickly added that in Rufus' early suicide Baldwin turns away from the expected protest novel conventions and, further, that Rufus' symbolic power becomes diffused through Baldwin's intricate subplotting of surprising sexual groupings. Yet Rufus is a force to be reckoned with. He is the enraged victim of social forces beyond his control. His anger only produces more severe alienation, and his options become so closed that his frustration and hatred ultimately turn inward upon himself. Shortly before his suicide, Rufus' friend Vivaldo searches him out, hoping to help him, and hoping also to discover some answers for himself. He finds Rufus in a "silent" wrecked building, in a small room which "seemed very far from the life breathing all around . . . all over the island" (*Another*, p. 67). As in a cage, Rufus "walks restlessly up and down" (*Another*, p. 67), finally stopping to speak to, but not look at, Vivaldo:

> Sometimes I lie here and listen, listen for a bomb, man, to fall on this city and make all the noise stop. I listen to hear them moan, I want them to bleed and choke, I want to hear them *crying*, man, for somebody to come help them. . . . It's going to happen one of these days, it's got to happen. I sure would like to see it. (*Another*, p. 68)

The irony, of course, is that in direct contrast to Bigger, Rufus does not "see it," and that it is Rufus himself who ends up moaning, choking, and crying for help.

The point is that Baldwin chooses not to prolong the initial deterministic mood throughout the remainder of *Another Country*, or throughout the major body of his fictional writing. Each novel and short story has its clear deterministic elements, but they remain, like the Rufus segment from *Another Country*, only elements. It is interesting to note that as Baldwin's essays have become more politically radical over the years, as in the collection *No Name in the Streets* (1972), his novels and short stories have not. Black Christopher, in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, is a political activist--"I think you got to agree that we need some guns" (*Tell Me*, p. 483)--but he is greatly overshadowed by the other characters in the novel who are definitely not political or terribly active (i.e., Barbara and Leo Proudhammer). In a sense, one might say that, especially in recent years, Baldwin has begun to write "Everybody's Protest Essay" while keeping his fiction, to use his own terms, "ambiguous" and "complex."

In order to measure up to his own standards, what Baldwin says, then, about urban experience must move beyond social determinism. He has to say something we did not already know before reading *Native Son*, and he does, with the "power of revelation" springing from metaphor. As Sonny's brother, the narrator of "Sonny's Blues" looks out over the heads of his class of algebra students and makes the following observation:

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[11] Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 215-39.

> I was sure that the first time Sonny had ever had a horse, he couldn't have been much older than these boys were now. These boys, now, were living as we'd been living then, they were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities. They were filled with rage. All they really knew were two darknesses, the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness, and in which they now, vindictively, dreamed, at once more together than they were at any other time and more alone. (*Going*, p. 104)

The metaphors form the heart of Baldwin's urban vision. Here we move beyond an echo of the "narrow room" image into the "darkness of the movies." The insidious nature of "the darkness of the movies" is not so much that it blinds the students both to themselves and to the world outside the self, but that it simultaneously offers a false sense of potential action. The "vindictive dreams" hold the students in an illusion of power, in an absolute waste of energy. The movies foster a very passive community, a disastrous shared innocence in which even fantasy is dictated and scripted. This, for Baldwin, is the true nature of alienation in America, and it is an alienation which encompasses Black and White alike, although perhaps not to the same degree. He views both Blacks and Whites retreating from basic tragic facts of reality into an intricate system of illusions, illusions which ultimately imprison. As he writes in *The Fire Next Time*: "One clings then to chimeras, by which one can only be betrayed, and the entire hope--the entire possibility--of freedom disappears."[12]

Literally and figuratively "the darkness of movies" pervades Baldwin's fiction. In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, John celebrates his birthday by taking himself to the movies. His ironic choice is *Of Human Bondage*, a melodrama of unfulfilled desires and fulfilled retributions. John is initially attracted by the movie's "gigantic" poster advertisement showing a partially undressed woman berating her young "blond" lover. The inevitable moral printed above their heads warns: "There's a fool like him in every family--and a woman next door to take him over!" (*Go Tell*, p. 37). It is a moral holding dramatic appeal for John: "He decided to see this, for he felt identified with the blond young man, the fool of his family, and he wished to know more about his so blatantly unkind fate" (*Go Tell*, p. 37). Once seated inside the "darkness," however, John's identification shifts to the woman and to her arrogant defiant anger: "He wanted to be like her, only more powerful, more thorough, and more cruel" (*Go Tell*, p. 39). Yet the woman meets a quick "grotesque" death ("as she deserved"), crying, alone, "dirty in a dirty room" (*Go Tell*, p. 39). Her crippled passive and masochistic lover, however, goes on to a happy ending, marrying a "very sweet" young girl.

What happens to John in the darkness of the movies is that he takes part in an absurd cultural ritual of passivity. He enters the theater searching for an answer to his loneliness and psychological despair--his "fate." The answer which strikes him deep within, assertion through anger, is shown to lead only to more severe and, indeed, final desperation. In the process of the movies, John's anger surfaces, sublimates, and is then even more deeply repressed. As he himself feels, "the Lord . . . led him into this theater to show him an example of the wages of sin" (*Go Tell*, p. 40). The happy ending of the movie serves to reinforce

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[12]James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell, 1962), p. 125. All further references will occur within the body of the essay as *The Fire*.

the repression of reality and self; suffering is ultimately rewarded. John emerges from the theater hardened in his own innocence of the nature of the world and of his own feelings. This is also the full measure of the defeat inherent in Vivaldo's image in *Another Country* of walking by a movie theater landmarked by the "tough boys and tough men who *always* stood outside it" (emphasis added, *Another*, p. 300); that is, the toughness in not that of muscle, but that of illusion, a deadening of feeling, a denial of consciousness.

Baldwin makes the point more graphically in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*. Like John, Leo's and Caleb's favorite refuge is the movie theater, ironically named the Lincoln. On one such outing, their father stops them and demands to know what movies they are going to see:

> "I don't know," said Caleb. "We'll see what's playing at the Lincoln."
> "I don't want his [Leo's] mind all messed up--you know that."
> "He ain't going to get his mind messed up--not by going to the movies."
> "You don't know the Jew like I know him. . . . It's the Jew makes them movies, man, in order to mess up our minds." (*Tell Me*, p. 28)

And indeed, as Leo realizes shortly after Lincoln's movie, there had been "some great assault . . . on my imagination, on my sense of reality" (*Tell Me*, p. 31). It is basically an assault aimed at thwarting a full inner maturity. In a later movie episode, as the theater lights briefly come up between the cartoon and the feature (Ann Sheridan in *King's Row*), Leo surveys the "other worshipers":

> Strange people, sitting, mainly alone. There were one or two couples, very, very young. . . . I was between fourteen and fifteen then, and the boys and girls could not have been much older. But they impressed me as being children, children forever, children not as a biological fact, but as a perpetual condition. (*Tell Me*, p. 229)

This is the meaning of fate in Baldwin's fiction: fate is a cultural complicity which creates and maintains illusions and dooms not only the self, but society, to innocence. And it is, as Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time*, the "innocence" of both the authors and victims of racism "which constitutes the crime" (*The Fire*, p. 16).

That Baldwin sees a way out of this crime, a means of forestalling, at least temporarily, this fate, is what most clearly separates his work from the protest tradition and moves his fiction beyond sociology. In his 1949 essay, Baldwin insists that what distinguishes literature from sociology is the "journey towards a more vast reality" (*Notes*, p. 11). The image of "journey towards" is crucial to Baldwin's philosophical argument and to his artistic vision. The protagonist of the protest novel does not so much seek after as be chased (i.e., the "Flight" of *Native Son*). Baldwin's protagonists more actively quest, whether after identity or acceptance. Recently it has become popular to say that the object of such quest in Baldwin's fiction is "love,"[13] and perhaps it is, but the key to the quest is sensuality. What Americans have lost, Whites more than Blacks, Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time*, is the ability to feel and understand "sensuality." The word "sensual," he goes on to define,

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[13]Howard M. Harper, Jr., *Desperate Faith: A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin, and Updike* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), p. 148.

> . . . is not intended to bring to mind quivering maidens or priapic black studs. I am referring to something much simpler and much less fanciful. To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread. (*The Fire*, pp. 61-62)

Clearly in Baldwin's fiction sensuality occurs more often in the effort of physical love than in the breaking of bread, but the emphasis is really on the word "present." To be sensual is to be fully conscious and thus break out of the passivity and break through the illusions inherent in the image of "the darkness of the movies." The paradox of the illusions of movies is that they can also fulfill themselves into the realities of urban life. Thus when the police suddenly detain Caleb and Leo on their way home from the movies, pushing the two up against a wall and making them raise their hands in the air, Leo remarks that "I felt, at once, as though Caleb and I had conjured up a movie; that if I had not been describing a movie to him, we would not have suddenly found ourselves in the middle of one. Or was it the end?" (*Tell Me*, p. 57). Or as Tish describes Police Officer Bell in *If Beale Street Could Talk*: "He walked the way John Wayne walks, striding out to clean up the universe, and he believed all that shit: a wicked, stupid, infantile, mother-fucker" (*If Beale*, p. 171).

Tish's consciousness is *present*. She can recognize illusions and innocence (Bell is "infantile") because she exists beyond them. Cass's recognition and subsequent rejection of such illusions in *Another Country* takes a more expansively concrete form. Cass's "trouble" stems in part from Richard's coldness and artistic pretensions and in part from her own inability to feel and be "present": "I sit in that house like--like a housekeeper. I take care of the kids and make meals and scrub toilet bowls and answer the phone" (*Another*, p. 274). She yearns for vitality yet fears its consequences. As she leaves her crucial interview with Vivaldo, she feels helpless, another one of the passively adrift: "It was like waving goodbye to land: and she could not guess what might have befallen her, when, and if, she ever saw land again" (*Another*, p. 283). Her initial response to chaos is to head for Loew's Sheridan Theater. Yet all she sees on the screen are "the extraordinary unconvincing wiggles of a girl whose name, incredibly enough, appeared to be Doris Day" (*Another*, p. 283). Cass's reaction to the movie signals a sudden decision and gain of consciousness. (Similarly, when Caleb returns from the sadistic brutalities of the work farm, his new awareness is symbolized by his loud and growing laughter at Ronald Reagan et al. in *Kings Row*.) Finally, "during the heaviest of the wide screen's technicolored stormy weather," Cass leaves to call Eric. Her decision to call is an active movement into life, an embrace of sensuality, a turning away from passivity.

Cass's movement into vital energy is short-lived. Others, however, are more successful. The most effective form of "present" in Baldwin's novels is the sensuality of the artist (Eric, Proudhammer, Vivaldo, Fonny, Ida, Sonny), and Baldwin, perhaps more than any other American writer, asserts the inevitability that life must be lived as performance. As Leo Proudhammer states it:

> There is a truth in the theater and there is a truth in life--they meet, but they are not the same, for life, God help us, *is* the truth. And those disguises which an artist wears are his means, not of fleeing the truth, but of attempting to approach it. . . . One's disguises are designed to make truth a quantity with which one can live--or from which one can hope, by the effort of living, to be delivered. (*Tell Me*, pp. 112-13)

One must have control over appearance and disguise or be controlled by them. Since disguise and illusion are the facts of life, freedom involves the ability not only to recognize levels of deception, but the ability to deceive as well. The choice is really between agent and victim, between sitting in the midst of the darkness of movies or, like Eric, Proudhammer, and the narrator of "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," making movies oneself.

Measured against the more overtly political perspective of the protest novel, such performance can be seen not only as highly individualistic but also as a mark of compromise--an acquiescence to a certain reality of surfaces, an adapting to, rather than a changing of, these surfaces. At the conclusion of *If Beale Street Could Talk*, for example, Fonny has neither been destroyed by the racist legal system nor is he actively planning revenge. Instead, he is "working on the wood, on the stone, whistling, smiling" (*If Beale*, p. 197). Leo Proudhammer, at the conclusion of *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, is "waiting for my cue" (*Tell Me*, p. 484), never having acted on or realized the violent potential inherent in his name.

Yet for all their personal or political compromises, for all their "waiting on cue," Baldwin's protagonists generally embody a kind of enlightened egoism in which the possibilities of life are defined by its limits, in which one begrudgingly decides not to physically fight the ways of the world. (There is really no major riot scene and little violent physical confrontation in Baldwin's fictional world.) One surely cannot read Baldwin without feeling the weight of his social protest, without feeling the narrowness of his lonely rooms or the insidiousness of his darkened movie theaters. One also surely cannot read Baldwin without feeling the limited possibilities of the embrace and the positive sensuality of his artists. More importantly, one cannot read Baldwin without sensing the focus on improving and changing self rather than society. Black Christopher can point out the need for guns repeatedly, yet the guns finally will not be bought. It is this personal individual focus which most essentially separates Baldwin's literature from "sociology." Whether it is better in some abstract artistic or concrete political sense to insist on such a focus is really another question.

PART III

LATINO LITERATURE

MORAL DECAY IN LA PERLA IN SAN JUAN AND HARLEM IN NEW YORK: A STUDY OF A RENAISSANCE THEME IN MODERN PUERTO RICAN LITERATURE

RICHARD A. VALDÉS

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

NORMAN, OKLAHOMA

Jorge Luis Borges begins his essay on Gaucho poetry with the anecdote concerning Whistler, which is here paraphrased: It is said that someone asked Whistler how long it had taken him to paint one of his *Nocturnes*, to which he responded, "All of my life." According to Borges' interpretation of the law of causality, he could have responded with equal accuracy, "All of the centuries which had preceded my painting it."[1] In considering modern literature, especially the literature of a nation or people who are economically, socially, or culturally oppressed, it is too easy to commit the error of looking for the relevant and present significance of the work and, in so doing, ignore the centuries of literary tradition which have not only causally resulted in this present-day work, but also into which it must fit as an integral part.

At this time we should distinguish between literature and writing. Although only the test of time will tell which works will go down in the history of literature as timeless and classic works, we can differentiate at the present moment between literature and writing which is not literature. We must hasten to add that this is not a value judgment but rather a descriptive discrimination. Political treatises, economic studies, and critical investigations may have great social and intellectual value, but they are not literature. For the purposes of this study, literature is defined as writing which demonstrates an aesthetic purpose as well as any other purpose: sociological, psychological, etc., which it may have. We say the work must demonstrate this purpose because often the author's intentions are not carried through in the work. Some authors intend to write literature but write works of social value which are not literature; on the other hand, some works intended to express a message often have great literary value.

Given this definition of literature, it is important to show not only the social significance of modern Puerto Rican literature, but also how it integrates into the body of universal literature, and Spanish literature in particular. Dr. Rodolfo Cortina Gómez has made a literary biogram of the Puerto Rican personality, 1849 to 1894.[2] The same method which is used herein could be applied to

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[1] Jorge Luis Borges, "La poesía gauchesca," *Discusión* (Buenos Aires, 1957), p. 11.

[2] Rodolfo Cortina Gómez, "Toward a Literary Biogram of the Puerto Rican Personality: 1849-1894," *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, Vol. II, No. 4 (1975).

the works which he has studied. It was chosen, however, to focus this analysis on the modern period, especially those works written after *Asomante* began publication in 1945.

For the main part, Puerto Rican literature has followed traditional models concerning genre: short stories, novels, plays, etc., although it has innovated within these forms. Consideration will be directed towards the thematic relation between modern Puerto Rican literature and traditional Spanish literature. During the Renaissance in Spain, with the pressures of courtly life and its concurrent artificiality, many authors noted the loss of traditional values and the deleterious effect which this life had on the people. By 1518, Castiglione had written his work on the code of conduct for a gentleman in court, which was soon after translated by Boscan as *El Cortesano*. It soon followed that the observance of the codes of courtly conduct became more important than the more human codes of ethics to which people had adhered. Taking the first line from the second epode by Horace: "*Beatus ille qui procul negottis . . .* " (Blessed is the man who far from the cares of business . . .), Fray Luis de Leon wrote: "*Que descansada vida/ La del que huye el mundanal ruido*" (What a restful life/ that of him who flees from worldly noise).[3] He goes on to extol the virtues of the simple life in the country communing with nature and enjoying the honest pleasures of life rather than seeking fortune or fame. Other authors of this period also wrote on this subject: Jorge de Montemayor treats of the superiority of pastoral life to that of courtly life in his *Los siete libros de la Diana*; and it is the main theme of Fray Antonio de Guevara's *Menosprecio de corte y alabanza de aldea*, published in 1539. In this latter work, the author advises:

> *. . . y si viere que su condición es ambiciosa, bulliciosa, codiciosa e inquieta, estése en la corte y muera en la corte porque el tal día que se fuere a retraer a su casa le puede el cura señalar la sepultura. E si el tal cortesano fuere virtuoso, manso, honesto y quieto, dé la corte a Dios y váyase a retraer a su casa, y allí verá y conoscerá que nunca supo qué cosa era el vivir sino despues que se vino a retraer.*
>
> (. . . and if he finds that his condition is ambitious, noisy, envious, and restless, stay in court and die in court because the day that he may go to retire to his home the priest can designate his sepulture. And if this courtier is virtuous, docile, modest, and peaceful, give the court his farewell and retire to his home, and there he will see and know that he never knew what living was until he retired.)[4]

The titles to the various chapters in this book list several aspects of this classic Renaissance theme: that life in the country is more tranquil and privileged than life in court, that the days are longer and clearer and life is cheaper in the country, that men are more virtuous and less vice-ridden in the country than in court, of the virtues the author lost at court and the vices he acquired there, and that among courtiers there is little friendship or loyalty and that life at court is difficult. Guevara insists that life is very difficult at court:

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[3]Fray Luis de Leon, "Oda I, Vida Retirada," in Elias L. Rivers, ed., *Renaissance and Baroque Poetry of Spain* (New York, 1966), p. 91.

[4]Fray Antonio de Guevara, *Menosprecio de corte y alabanza de aldea* (Buenos Aires, 1947), p. 47. (Note: The translation which follows in the text and all other translations given hereafter are those of this paper's author.)

No por más sufren los cortesanos tantos trabajos, sino por no estar en sus tierras sujetos a otros y por estar más libertados para los vicios. ¡O quánto de su hazienda y aun quánto de su honra le cuesta a un cortesano aquella infelice libertad; porque muy mayor es la sujeción que tiene a los cuydados que la libertad que tiene para los vicios! Propiedad es de vicios que, por muy sabrosos que sean, al fin empalagan; más los cuydados de la honra siempre atormentan.

(For no other reason do courtiers suffer so many hardships than not to be on their land subject to someone and to have more freedom for vices. How much of his estate and how much of his honor does it cost a courtier for that unhappy liberty; because the subjection to the cares is much greater than the liberty for vices! It is a property of vices that regardless how delicious they are, after a while they tire one; but the cares of honor continue to torment.)[5]

The bishop also speaks of the artificiality of courtly life and substitution of values which the courtier must make, embracing an artificial code.

We can see this Renaissance theme, which has persevered in literature because of its archetypal nature, expressed in modern Puerto Rican literature, given the change from the court in Spain to the urban centers of San Juan and New York: La Perla and Harlem. La Perla is the slum in San Juan which has gained notoriety due to Oscar Lewis' study of poverty and prostitution there in his controversial work, *La Vida*. Harlem, once the refuge for Blacks moving north in search of employment, has become the homeland of the Puerto Rican immigrant.

In the works of the past thirty years, we see, along with the theme of the loss of Latin spiritual values to Anglo-Saxon material values, a theme which has been prominent in Latin American letters during the past century, most notably in José Enrique Rodo's *Ariel*--the theme of the virtues of rural life as opposed to the vices of urban life. While demographic studies may indicate that the majority of the Puerto Ricans who come to New York are educated, semi-skilled urban dwellers, still attitudes not present in statistics are revealed in literature.[6] Most Puerto Ricans see themselves as coming from a tropical island, a fertile green land where warm breezes blow in from the Caribbean, in sharp contrast to the snow and cold wind, elevated tracks, and asphalt and cement-covered streets of New York City.

In the generation of authors born between 1911 and 1929, mainly the generation of *Asomante*, as Concha Meléndez called it, we find the alienation of man from the land developing as a major theme. She tells us:

El estado de alma colectivo encarnado en este grupo humano, es la solaridad y el interés por gentes y zonas sociales acosadas por la miseria y el desempleo o desenvolviéndose en trabajos humildes o fábricas

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[5] *Ibid.*, p. 118.

[6] For a statistical study of the Puerto Rican immigration, see Clarence Senior, *The Puerto Ricans* (New York, 1965); for a literary view of the Puerto Rican immigrants in New York, see José Luis Vivas Maldonado, *A vellón las esperanzas o Melanía* (New York, 1971).

poderosas, pero aniquiladoras de la vida libre y el contacto con la naturaleza, esenciales para el equilibrio de los hombres sobre la tierra.

(The collective state of mind embodied by this human group is the solidarity and the interest in the people and social sectors, pursued by poverty and unemployment or developing in humble jobs or in powerful factories, which destroy the free life and contact with nature essential to the well-being of men on earth.)[7]

It is the latter theme which is considered here.

This theme appears in some form in the works of Puerto Rican authors writing before *Asomante* began publication. Tomás Blanco (1900) treats the contrast between the virtuous and honest life of those close to the land and the artificiality of sophisticated urban life in "Tres pasos y un encuentro" (1937). Here we see the contrast between the poor *jíbaro* devoted to the land, the black woman expert in domestic affairs and midwifery, and Ella and El who live in the city and consider themselves superior to the others. The latter couple drink carbonated soft drinks and read manuals on how to win friends and influence people but lack the warmth and sincerity which the country dwellers possess naturally.[8]

An even more poignant presentation of this conflict between the honest man of the earth and the sophisticated urban dweller occurs in his later work, "Naufragio" (1952), in which the honest but humble fisherman, Pedro, is contrasted to the American tourist Dorothy Lattimer and her friends, who fish for sport. While the former has an honorable and productive occupation, feeding the masses with the fruits of his labor, the latter fishes for inedible fish and discards the fish once they have been photographed. The sportfishing excursion appears to Pedro to be a mockery of his profession. The symbolic significance of his name, Peter the fisherman, should not be ignored. There is a spiritual as well as material value to his work: he feeds the hungry as scripture commands Christ's followers to do.[9]

Part of the conflict between city and country life is due to the influence of the United States as an urbanizing, sophisticating force which militates against the virtuous country life and values of the Puerto Ricans. Emilio Belaval treats this contrast in his stories about university life in Puerto Rico. It is, however, with the publication of *Asomante* that the breadth of the treatment of this theme expands to include the urban dwellers in the slums of San Juan and New York: La Perla and Spanish Harlem. Among the authors who treat this subject, we find Abelardo Díaz Alfaro (1926) and José Luis González (1925), who treat the problems of the Puerto Rican immigrant confronted with the cruel hardships of New York for which he is in no way prepared. This is the main theme of "Nueva York" from *El hombre en la calle*. In another story in this same volume, "El vendedor," he treats the moral degeneration of a Puerto Rican driven by his desperation to a final revelation of his state, which is climaxed in his cry which sounds like the sigh of a wounded animal. He also dealt with this theme in his short novel, *Paisa*.

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[7]Concha Meléndez, *Arte del cuento en Puerto Rico* (New York, 1961), p. 10.

[8]Tomás Blanco, "Tres pasos y un encuentro," *Ateneo Puertorriqueño*, Vol. III, No. 2 (July, August, September, 1937), pp. 163-70.

[9]Tomás Blanco, "Naufragio," *Presente*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1952).

Paisa narrates the steps by which Andrés, the protagonist, degenerates. The novel starts with Andrés and "*el otro*," the one who leads him astray, involved in a burglary. By means of flashbacks, Tomás Blanco tells of how Andrés progressed from his family life as a *jíbaro* in the country to La Perla in San Juan and finally to New York, where we find him involved in a crime. The story gains impact from the use of memories and dialogues, mainly on the part of the protagonist.

René Marqués presents this same theme and a parallel development of the plot, but in dramatic fashion, in "La Carreta" (1951). This play follows the moral disintegration of a family through three acts, which Marqués calls "*estampas*," each titled according to the setting: *El campo* (the country), *El arrabal* (the slum), and *La metrópoli* (the metropolis). While in the country, there are genuine and serious problems with poverty and the loss of their land due to the misfortunes of the deceased father. Luis, the son, is driven by the desire to better his family's situation, while don Chago, the old man, refuses to leave the land on which he has toiled all of his life. When Luis says that he does not want to be a peon, the old man argues:

> *Al fin y al cabo tóh somoh peoneh. Yo fuí peón toa mi vía. Peón anteh de casarme. Peón en la finca de tu madre. Peón en la parte de esa finca que te tocó a tí. Y ahora sigo siendo peón aonde quiera que consiga una chiripa. ¿Qué de malo tié ser peón? No hay otro mó de ehtar cerca de la tierra.* [Note: Marqués tries to capture orthographically the phonetic variants in rural Puerto Rican Spanish.]
>
> (Once you get right down to it, we are all peons. I was a peon all my life. A peon before I got married. A peon on your mother's farm. A peon on the part of this farm which you got. And now I will continue being a peon anywhere I can get a break. What is wrong with being a peon? It is the only way to be close to the earth.)[10]

The old man insists on staying in the country; he wants to die on the land which has nurtured him. The family moves on to La Perla in San Juan, driven by Luis' ambition to work in a factory and better the family's material position. Another theme present in this play is the obsessive and destructive nature of progress: Luis is obsessed with machines. He feels that machines are the future of mankind, and he wants to get away from the earth and enter into the bowels of the machines so that he can find their soul. After encouraging the family to move to San Juan where they will live in La Perla by the sea, right next to the famous fort of El Moro, he loads their belongings on a cart and moves them to the city.

In the second act, or *estampa*, the reality of La Perla is dramatically presented. Instead of roosters and country life, close to the earth where the daughter has a boyfriend who wants to marry her, the family finds dirt, poverty, and moral decay: Juanita gets raped, pregnant, and finally an abortion; Chaguito is arrested for theft; and Luis is involved in an apparent affair with a married woman. The slum smells of "*mierda y basura*" (feces and garbage) and destroys their illusions of a better life. The mother decries her situation:

> *Luis, loh de mi sangre ehtán marditoh. Mi padre, murió sobre la tierra, en una cueva, como un perro sin dueño. Mijo ehtá en la cárcel. Mija está deshonrrá. . . .*

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[10]René Marqués, "La Carreta," *Asomante*, Vol. VII, No. 4 (1957), p. 70.

(Luis, all of my kin are damned. My father died on the ground in a cave, like a dog without a master. My son is in jail. My daughter is dishonored. . . .)[11]

The only positive notes in this act occur when Juanita plays with the baby, Lito, which arouses her maternal instinct, and when she receives a present from her former boyfriend: a carved oxcart, a model of the one in which the family left the country. This cart will function in the remainder of the play as a symbol of the country and their emigration from it. At the end of the play, the symbol will be reversed and represent their return to the land.

The third act takes place in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in the Bronx. Here their material situation has improved: they have a well-furnished apartment, Juanita has left home and has her own apartment, she wears stylish clothes and has her hair done in a permanent; but the moral disintegration has reached greater depths. Juanita now says there is no clean money or dirty money--it is all money. There is also the telling commentary on the situation of the Puerto Rican in New York: racial discrimination; Puerto Ricans burnt to death because their slum dwelling did not have a fire escape; the Puerto Rican writer who is taken for a communist or an independentist whenever he writes; the Black Puerto Rican who is shot to death by the police for stealing a woman's purse with five dollars, a lipstick, and a dirty handkerchief.

Luis finally fulfills his obsession. He works in a boiler factory and, while at work, he is crushed to death when he tries to examine the insides of a machine. At this point the family, what remains of it (Juanita and her mother), decide to take his remains back to Puerto Rico so that he may be buried in Puerto Rican earth and so that they may return to work the land as their ancestors had done.

While the end of the play tends to be somewhat overdone and melodramatic, the theme is brought into focus with great clarity. In New York they are completely isolated. They are inferior beings whose loneliness and emptiness consume them. Even the coming together of two people is the joining of two lonelinesses. The tragedy of Luis' death is magnified by the manner in which the Jehovah's Witness inadvertently tells the family of the accident.

. . . Los puertorriqueños tienen que orientarse en esta civilización mecanizada. Tienen que acabar con las supersticiones y la idolatría. Tienen que conocer el mundo de las máquinas. Mire, aquí hay folletos muy útiles. Son en español, muy bien traduciodos. Los obreros puertorriqueños tienen que conocer sus responsabilidades y rendir el máximo de labor. Nosotros los orientamos. Y así se evitan accidentes. Como ese que acaba de ocurrir ahí en la fábrica de calderos.

(. . . Puerto Ricans must learn their way around in this mechanized civilization. They must do away with superstitions and idolatry. They must get to know the world of machines. Look, here are some very useful pamphlets. They are in Spanish, very well translated. Puerto Rican workers must realize their obligations and give the maximum amount of work. We teach them how. In this way accidents are avoided. Like the one that just occurred in the boiler factory.)[12]

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[11] *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, No. 1 (1958), p. 77.

[12] *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, No. 3 (1958), p. 90.

The mother concludes that the curse that they have suffered is the result of having left the land. The land is sacred, and they must return to it and sink their hands once more into the earth to plant seeds as her grandfather had done. They return voluntarily: The cart of their lives is theirs to lead wherever they want, but Juanita now sees that their future is on the land on which they were born.

The corrupting influence of the city on a *jíbaro* occurs in many of the stories and novels written both in Puerto Rico and on the mainland. Concha Meléndez comments on the story by Esther Feliciano, which won honorable mention in the *Ateneo Puertorriqueño* competition in 1955:

> *. . . ahora el jíbaro trabaja en una finca de los Estados Unidos y gasta todo lo que gana en ropa, reloj pulsera, cámara fotográfica, olvidandose de mandar dinero a la madre, mientras se esfuerza en borrar de su persona "la mancha de plátano."*
>
> (. . . now the *jíbaro* works on a United States farm and spends all that he earns on clothes, a wristwatch, a camera, forgetting to send money to his mother, while he strives to erase from himself the "banana stain.")[13]

Not all of the Puerto Ricans who go to court (i.e., the city) are corrupted by it. There are a few who can retain their integrity and dignity in spite of the temptations and pressures upon them. One of the most moving examples is the blind man in *A vellón las esperanzas o Melanía* by José Luis Vivas Maldonado. Antero, the blind man, tells the two drunks he meets in a bar that he is not on relief--he works for a living assisting the superintendent of an apartment building. His values are sharply contrasted with those of the drunks who cannot understand why a blind man would want to work for a living when he could receive welfare payments.

In response to the interrogation of the drunk, Antero responds: *"Yo soy de Puerto Rico."* (I am from Puerto Rico.) When the second drunk accuses Antero of being an independentist, the barkeep joins in: *"Aquí somoh dos. ¡Viva Puerto Rico libre!"* (There are two of us here. Long live free Puerto Rico!) The second drunk responds: *"¡Qué viva la plata! Billetes verdes. Barriga llena, corazón contento."* (Long live money! Greenbacks. Full belly, contented heart.)[14]

Life in the city stifles the creative and human values of the Puerto Rican immigrants. In "Garabatos" by Pedro Juan Soto, an artist tries to recapture the happiness of his courtship with his wife on the Island, but now in New York his drawing is "indecent" in her eyes. Iris S. Thomason says of this story:

> *. . . pinta el cuento la influencia que hay en el ambiente a despreciar los valores artísticos e idealistas debido a la imperiosa necesidad de ganarse el pan de cada día.*

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[13]Concha Meléndez, *Literatura de ficción en Puerto Rico* (San Juan, 1971), p. 47.

[14]Vivas Maldonado, *A vellón*, pp. 57-58.

(. . . the story pictures the influence which there is in the milieu to deprecate artistic and idealistic values due to the unrelenting necessity to earn the daily bread.)[15]

The strongest condemnation of the urban life, however, is for the loss of moral values among the young people. Typical of this loss is the youth crying in the alley after a streetfight with some "gringos." He is only fourteen, but when he arrived from the Island, he had to join a street gang. What is even more indicative of the moral degeneracy is that he stole from his father to pay for the gang-emblem tattoo on his arm:

Cuando yo llegué de la Isla tuve que pensar bien en que gange me metía: los Dragoneh o los Vampiros. Me metí en los Vampiros por Dracula. . . . Eso de levantar uno la manga de la camisa y enseñar el tatuaje de vampiro le da uno un plante tremendo. Y el tatuaje me costó plata larga. Come que tuve que robarle al viejo largo y tendido pa pagarlo.

(When I arrived from the Island I had to think carefully about which gang I would join: the Dragons or the Vampires. I joined the Vampires because of Dracula. . . . Pulling up one's sleeve and showing the vampire tattoo makes one really belong. And the tattoo cost me plenty. I had to steal from the old man long and steady to pay for it.)[16]

Another example of the artificial values which have supplanted the spiritual values of the young Puerto Ricans who succumb to the corrupting influence of the city is found in "Champs" by Juan Pedro Soto. The sixteen-year-old boy feels that he is proving his manhood and becoming a champion by defeating Gavilán at pool. Gavilán, who had just served six months in prison, had lost two games in a row, and now Puruco, the fat, pimply kid, felt that he was establishing his place in the hierarchy of Harlem. "He was *el nuevo*, the successor to Gavilán and other respected individuals. He was equal. . . . No. Superior, . . . "[17] Puruco goes on daydreaming while attempting a third victory against Gavilán:

With Gavilán beat, he would defeat Mamerto and Bimbo. . . . "Make way for Puruco!" the connoisseurs would say. And he would impress the owners of poolhalls, he'd get good connections. He'd be bodyguard to some, intimate friend to others. He'd have cigarettes and beer for free. And women, not stupid girls who were always afraid and who wouldn't go further than some squeezing at the movies. From there to fame: the neighborhood *macho*, the man with a hand in everything--numbers, dope, the chick from Riverside Drive slumming in the *barrio*, the rumble between this gang and that to settle men's affairs.[18]

After Gavilán humiliates him and he leaves the poolhall almost in tears, he vents his anger on a small child playing in the street. The story concludes, "He

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[15]Iris S. Thomason, *Estudio general de la obra de Pedro Juan Soto subrayando los problemas de repatriación* (University of Tennesse, 1964), p. 31.

[16]Vivas Maldonado, *A* [illegible], p. 48.

[17]Pedro Juan Soto, *Spiks* (New York, 1973), pp. 63-64.

[18]*Ibid.*, p. 65.

was a champ. On his guard only for trouble."[19] The irony of the conclusion to the story makes the loss of values more impressive. Not only have artificial values, the values of the "court," supplanted the basically human values of the young people, but the test of manhood and the criterion for being a champion becomes dexterity at pool in Puruco's mind. He feels that he will be a man if he can beat the reigning pool champion. His humiliation and revenge on a defenseless child show how far he is from being a man. His concept of success in life also reflects the false values of the "courtier" in Spanish Harlem. While in the earlier stories about *jíbaros* and fishermen in Puerto Rico a man valued himself by being productive, helping to feed his family and others by growing food or fishing in the sea, Puruco sees an involvement in drugs, numbers, women, and gang fights as the mark of success.

This paper is not meant to be a sociological study of the problems of the Puerto Ricans who move from the country to the slums in the urban centers, La Perla in San Juan and Harlem in New York, but rather to point out how the subject of the immigration into these areas has served not only as a meaningful and relevant expression of social problems as seen by Puerto Rican authors, but also how this subject integrates their works into the tradition of Spanish literature. From the Renaissance, when courtly life started luring men away from the land with the promise of material profit and freedom for vices, in some cases, to the present time, it has been novelists and short story writers who have given artistic form to the call emanating from their consciences to return to essential human values: bringing forth food from the land and the sea, living together in a family situation even if this involves a lack of material comforts and precludes the fame and fortune which "courtly" life seems to promise.

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[19] *Ibid.*, p. 69.

RACE AND IDENTITY IN PUERTO RICAN LITERATURE

RODOLFO CORTINA GÓMEZ

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE

MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

Among the indispensable elements of identity are the following: race, language, folklore, and the history or life cycle of the individual whose identity is under scrutiny. Race has occupied a prominent place among the Puerto Ricans as they have, in the course of their own lives, attempted to create and to forge a viable national identity. The record of this development can be evidenced in their literature. It has achieved a symbolic status like several other component elements of identity, but race is a more appealing symbol because it becomes one through personification, and though this may be true of other elements, it is so only on occasion. Also one can easily imagine how race can and does encompass through its incarnate symbol all other elements of identity listed above. Hence a careful examination of all these may well point to race as the element which serves as an indicator to identity formation and its crises.

The Puerto Rican heritage exhibits three basic racial strains which stem from the history of the Island: first its indigenous inhabitants (Arawaks), then the Spaniards (Europe), and finally the slaves (Africa). One could say that from the beginning, because of political and economic as well as religious reasons, it was more important to emphasize the European tradition. This meant that Puerto Rico was to have the Caucasian race as the canon for beauty and virtue and all concomitants thereof. The narrowly defined identity of Puerto Ricans thus becomes the parental legacy of the Island as it attempts in the early nineteenth century to move forward in its definition of itself. Colonial status is, after all, a long infancy for Puerto Rico.

The man of letters seeks to make the definition more acceptable by sometimes preserving customs and traditions which Spain had cast out or which were indigenous to Puerto Rico. Such is the case with Manuel Alonso in his book, *El Jíbaro* (1849).[1] His expressed purpose in writing the book was to show the lack of harmony between his book and those written in Spain. In other words, he felt that Puerto Rico's image, as presented by Spanish scholars, exhibited an historiographical bias. The folklore he attempted to preserve in his book was, on occasion, already changing. Hence he claimed to be trying to "*corregir las costumbres deleitando*" in an obvious paraphrase of Horace. He admitted, however, to attempting such preservation of folk culture with ulterior motives. Alonso's position was that a custom, such as "El bando de San Pedro," whose demise was certain if things were to continue to deteriorate as they had (p. 29), should be saved, especially by the privileged class because it provided inexpensive entertainment for the lower classes, namely the *jíbaros* themselves. This class consciousness was even more apparent (p. 12) as Alonso complained of the great

[1]Manuel A. Alonso, *El Jíbaro* (Barcelona: Editorial Vosgos, S.A. 1975), p. 11. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

difficulties he had to face after adopting the middle style in order to write his book. This statement, as all others alluded to, however, was predicated on his reading public, which must have been limited to the "*clase privilegiada*," which he later addresses. One other thing must be pointed out here. Already in the "Prologue," Alonso gives the accidental reason for writing his book as his desire to write an article on educational reform in Puerto Rico. A reading of the piece reveals a concern to have Puerto Rican education be more advanced, more like that of Spain. For Alonso, therefore, the Puerto Rican identity was very much linked to a particular perspective of society acquired by belonging to the upper class. This class wants Puerto Rico to be more like Spain. It, at the same time, wants to preserve its own territorial folklore and wants like an infant to be recognized as an individual by the mother country. This search for recognition was expressed in the piece entitled "Perico Paciencia," which was a petition for representation of the Island's government in the Spanish Cortes (parliament). The *jíbaro*, from whom the book derived its title, was the white rustic peasant of Puerto Rico, even though the word itself may have come from Taino, the language of the Arawak Indians. Hence Alonso's view of Puerto Rican identity was bound in many ways to the Hispanic tradition and to the Caucasian race. The early Romantics were emphasizing, for reasons of their own, such as class consciousness, a white bias in Puerto Rican letters.

The later Romantics, such as Eugenio María de Hostos, sought to emphasize the Indian heritage and its role in the true essence of Puerto Rico. His novel, *La peregrinación de Bayoán* (1863), for example, tends to view the indigenous element as primordial in the *boricua* identity. The novel opens with a key of names and their allegorical meanings. These--Borinquen, Luquillo, Haití, Higuey, Mayaguez, Cibao, Guanahaní, Guarionex, Bayoán, Marién--are all indigenous names, as is readily apparent, though we must point out that they refer not only to Puerto Rico, but also to the other Antilles as well. The direction of meaning implicit in and thrust outwardly from the indigenous onomastic catalogue, therefore, is not pointing solely toward Puerto Rico. Thus, the semantic field covered by any such identity must be ultimately Antillean. This is confirmed by Hostos' first political program, since his desires concerned an Antillean confederation which would be autonomous from Spain but responsible to it in the end. The problem with Hostos' Indian is that he is nowhere to be seen in the novel's narrative. Instead we see the Horatian *beatus ille*, and we begin to suspect that the Indian here may be nothing but an abstracted noble savage who was raped by the Spanish discovery, conquest, and civilization, but who has become patently invisible. Only the names remain, and yet Hostos finds it necessary to use them. With them he makes possible a more inclusive identity on the one hand, and by virtue of the racial value of the names he differentiates the Puerto Rican and the Antillean from the Spaniard.

Other writers in the nineteenth century do not essentially modify the positions adopted by Alonso or Hostos except in a matter of degrees. The twentieth century brings about a new shift. Where Alonso availed himself of the *jíbaro* image, white rustic, and Hostos employed an onomastic key full of Taino names, indigenous Arawaks, now we find Luis Palés Matos highlighting the African element, blacks and mulatto, in order to construct the Puerto Rican identity with a new dimension. Though he published *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* as late as 1937, Palés Matos had already brought to light some of his negroid poetry as early as 1925, "Pueblo negro." His poetic production in this particular vein spans, therefore, more than a decade, a significant period in the life of any writer. By then Puerto Rico had already become a colony of the United States of America as a result of the Spanish American War. The employment of the black man as a component

element of Puerto Rican identity during those dozen years of writing negroid poetry can be linked to the movement for Puerto Rican independence. In fact, slave emancipation, which took place on the Island in 1873, very late in the nineteenth century, came at the time in which Puerto Ricans were demanding their freedom from Spain. The black man thus represents freedom, and his image is transformed from negative to positive. But Palés Matos' treatment of the Negro comprises the ethos of the Antilles, not just Puerto Rico. In this way the Black, like the Indian, serves the writer's purpose of differentiating that which is autochthonous from that which is foreign to the Island.

Most elements of Puerto Rican poetry of negritude serve to illustrate the broad outline which has been sketched very briefly above. For example, the use of onomatopoeia, a characteristic of *diepalismo*, seeks to reduce the linguistic competition of English and Spanish to the contraposition of non-sensical markers in poetry or music. Hence the "*tu cu tú*" of much negroid poetry draws a very firm line around an inner core of Puerto Rican identity, especially as this concerns language. Another example is the use of African myths which, though condescending to the Blacks, are even more frightening in a comic sort of way to the world embodied in the United States. "*Ñam Ñam*" is a fair illustration of this attitude. The emphasis on zoological images underscores an opposition between the primitive world of the African Antilles and the civilized world of North America. The heavy reliance on sensual and sexual imagery runs counter to the very repressed and prudish Anglo-Saxon stance toward the erotic. Whether he makes a logical representation of the world of the Antilles or not, Palés Matos does achieve his end of polarizing the internal identity versus the external influence. One may agree or disagree with his political tactics, but these, as part of a poetic stratagem, have made great sense.

The question of race in the development of a Puerto Rican identity has been of great importance. Though only a sketchy outline has been traced herein, it is hoped that the essential features are recognizable.

BARRIO VERSUS GHETTO: THE POET VERSUS THE SOCIOLOGIST

NICOLÁS KANELLOS

INDIANA UNIVERSITY NORTHWEST

GARY, INDIANA

Full understanding of the word barrio and all of its connotations can be instrumental in the study of the urban experience of Chicanos and Puerto Ricans in the United States. A reexamination of this term and its use or misuse, as the case may be, is called for because many sociological studies of Latinos have borrowed the word from Spanish and erroneously used it to mean ghetto, depressed area, and slum. One short example should suffice to make the point clear. Celia S. Heller, on the very first page of her text entitled *Mobility Aspirations of Mexican Americans, New Converts to the American Dream?*, states that " . . . Mexican Americans live in deteriorating ghettos, barrios, where the unemployment, disease, and social pathology often run as high as among Negroes."[1] This increasingly prevalent connotation of social ills, crime, and deterioration for the word barrio must ultimately affect how barrio dwellers, like Puerto Ricans and Chicanos, are perceived by others. Indeed, this misapplication of the term has already led to a gross stereotype in the popular media. One need only review the content of television programs that deal with urban crime to realize to what degree the barrio as slum has become engraved in the popular culture. The deleterious effect of assigning a negative meaning to an important cultural concept like barrio, which includes a complex of many positive attitudes in its meaning for Latinos, can only reinforce stereotypes in the larger society and negative self-images among the Hispanic minorities who find themselves more often than not living in urban communities or barrios within larger cities.[2]

Essentially, barrio, as defined in both Spanish[3] and English dictionaries, means "one of the districts or wards into which a large town or city is divided by extension; an outlying village or district."[4] The term ghetto, on the other hand, is defined as "the part of a city or town formerly set apart for or occupied by

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[1]Celia S. Heller, *Mobility Aspirations of Mexican Americans, New Converts to the American Dream?* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1971), p. 13.

[2]For the statistics on the growing urbanization of Mexican Americans, see Leo Grebler, Joan W. Moore, and Ralph C. Guzmán, *The Mexican American People* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), pp. 112-17. For the distribution of the Puerto Rican population, see Joseph P. Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 72-76.

[3]Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la lengua española* (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1970), p. 169.

[4]Isaac K. Funk, ed., *Funk and Wagnall's New Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Funk and Wagnall's Co., 1963), p. 231.

Jews, as in Rome or Frankfurt-on-the-Main; the Jews quarter."[5] Thus a ghetto, at least in origin, differs from a barrio in that habitation of the ghetto is forced upon the inhabitants who make up a specific ethnic minority. Barrio is a general term that can simply mean neighborhood, section, or quarter of a city, or small town within a larger one. Finally, slum is defined as "a low, filthy quarter of a city or town; a street or place where debauched and criminal persons live or resort: usually in the plural."[6] It can be agreed that in common English parlance, at least, as well as in the language of the social scientist, the meaning of slum and ghetto are merging or have merged. The same process is occurring with barrio. More and more, barrio is merging in meaning with ghetto and slum.

For the Chicano and Puerto Rican in the United States, the barrio is a colony or a village within the larger city or town. Where today it may function for the larger society as a depository for Latinos, many barrios in the Southwest were formerly Mexican towns that were later engulfed by growing metropoli. Other barrios in Midwestern cities and the East did result from coersion by the larger society as well as desire on the part of Latinos.[7] Nevertheless, inasmuch as a barrio has its own set of values, attitudes, history, and geographic location, it is a community.[8] For the Latino, the barrio is "more than a geographic reality," state Castañeda, Ybarra-Frausto, and Sommers:

> . . . barrios are spiritual zones where the dynamics and vitality of the Chicano (and Puerto Rican) experience are formed, defined, and distilled. *Los barrios* are like urban villages, each one having its particular heroes and traditions, its personal code of ethics, its singular vision, and at times its own vocabulary and aesthetic. As distinct as each barrio is, they harbor people who have shared and endured a heritage of oppression.[9]

Thus part of our up-to-date definition of a Latino barrio must include the idea of oppression, for the political reality of the barrio today is that, although it maintains a culture of its own, it is ultimately a colonized area whose inhabitants do not govern their own community.

Eleizer Risco, editor of *La Raza* newspaper of Los Angeles, explains:

> The ghetto is where you are forced to live by housing discrimination. But *La Raza* has been living in the barrios for hundreds of years. No one has forced us. The barrios are not ghettos, although we do have ghettos

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[5] *Ibid.*, p. 1029.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 2299.

[7] See Américo Paredes, "El folklore de los grupos de origen Mexicano en los Estados Unidos," *Folklore Americano*, 14 (1966), p. 154.

[8] For a definition of community, see Nicholas S. Timaseff, Paul W. Farey, and John C. Schlereth, *General Sociology* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1959), Chap. 2 and 5.

[9] Antonia Castañeda Schular, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, and Joseph Sommers, *Literatura Chicana: texto y contexto* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 150.

> in the barrios. There are suburbs and there are skidrows; there are ghettos of the poor and there are neighborhoods of the rich. We have everything here that you have in the larger city, but one thing--you, in the larger city, govern us. We do not run our own lives because you do not let us. You run the barrios and you do not know how.[10]

Professor Américo Paredes has also emphasized that the barrios, or *colonias* as he prefers to call them, are stratified into classes and are made up of people from diverse geographic and economic backgrounds.[11] A picture should thus be emerging of the barrio as a total community with its social classes, its rich and its poor, its institutions, its rituals, and its customs.

Rather than consulting sociological studies of the urban setting of Latinos, examining the testimony of people who have participated in the milieu of the barrio from the inside and are faithful interpreters of its experience can lead to a more complete comprehension of the barrio. The most articulate exponents of the barrio are Chicano and Puerto Rican poets who, through their art, have been able to communicate the special sentiments that barrio life brings forth for Latinos but is difficult to communicate in everyday language. The most renowned poem on the barrio is Raul Salinas' "A Trip Through the Mind Jail."[12] In it the barrio, as protagonist, is seen as having preserved the poet's cultural heritage:

> Neighborhood of dilapidated community hall
> ...Salón Cinco de Mayo...
> yearly (May 5/Sept. 16) gathering
> of the *familias*. Reasserting pride
> on those two significant days.
> Speeches by the elders
> patriarchs with evidence of oppression
> distinctly etched upon *meatizo* faces.
> "Sons of the Independence!"
> Emphasis on allegiance to the *tri-color*
> obscure names: Juarez and Hidalgo
> their heroic deeds. Nostalgic tales of war
> years under Villa's command. No one listened,
> no one seemed to really care.
> Afterwards, the dance. Modest Mexican
> maidens dancing polkas together
> across splintered wooden floor.
> They never deigned to dance with boys!
> The careful scrutiny by curbstone sex-perts
> 8 and 9 years old. "Minga's bow-legged,
> so we know she's done it, huh?"
> Neighborhood of Sunday night *jamaicas*
> at Guadalupe Church.
> Fiestas for any occasion
> holidays holy days happy days

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[10] In Stan Steiner, *La Raza: The Mexican Americans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 142-43.

[11] Paredes, *Folklore Americano*, p. 154.

[12] In Castañeda et al., *Literatura Chicana*, pp. 182-86.

'round and 'round the *promenada*
eating snow-cones...*raspas*...and *tamales*
the games--bingo, cake walk, spin the wheel
making eyes at girls from cleaner neighborhoods
the unobtainables
who responded all giggles and excitement.

The barrio is the site of shared oppression:

Neighborhood that never saw a school-bus
the cross-town walks were much more fun
embarrassed when acquaintances or friends or relatives
were sent home excused from class
for having cooties in their hair!
Did only Mexicans have cooties in their hair?
Que gacho!

But, most importantly, the barrio provides an identity, not only for him, but for thousands of other Chicanos:

Neighborhood of my adolescence
neighborhood that is no more
YOU ARE TORN PIECES OF MY FLESH!!!
Therefore, you ARE
LA LOMA...AUSTIN...*MI BARRIO*
i bear you no grudge
i needed you then...identity...a sense of belonging.
i need you now.
So essential to adult days of imprisonment,
you keep me away from INSANITY'S hungry jaws;
Smiling/Laughing/Crying

i respect your having been:
My Loma of Austin
my Rose Hill of Los Angeles
my West Side of San Antonio
my Quinto of Houston
my Jackson of San José
my Segundo of El Paso
my Barelas of Albuquerque
my Westside of Denver

Flats, Los Marcos, Maravilla, Calle Guadalupe, Magnolia,
Buena Vista, Mateo, La Seis, Chiquis, El Sur and all
Chicano neighborhoods that now exist and once
existed; somewhere....., someone remembers.....

"A Trip Through the Mind Jail" is a melancholy remembrance of the poet's growing up in his neighborhood, his barrio, its culture, history, communal celebrations and rituals, its superstition and folklore, and too, the oppression under which it existed. Finally, both the poem and the barrio itself come to represent the poet's identity. "You are torn pieces of my flesh," he exclaims, "identity...a sense of belonging.../i need you now."

In "The Old Buildings," a New York Rican poet, Pedro Pietri, describes his old neighborhood and protests its destruction by Urban Renewal.

(1422 amsterdam avenue)
everybody knew
everybody else
everybody respected
and loved everybody else
unity was happening
whenever somebody
cooked *pasteles*
everybody in the building
was invited to eat
this is how together
everybody was in
those days (city hall
saw this harmony happening
and got intimidated
because there is nothing
that frightens
this government more
than seeing people
living and loving
and breathing together
so they decided to
demolish the buildings
that could have been
saved by renovation
and eliminate the unity)
everybody was moved
away from each other
to so-called better places
where you do not know
anybody when you move in
and you do not know anybody
when you move out
dead or alive or in
a straightjacket
the system tailored
especially for you and
all your close relatives
who came here looking
for better days and
finding the worst nights
of their existence as
they went from funeral
parlor to funeral parlor
looking for coffins
that were not too expensive[13]

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[13]In Pedro Pietri, *Puerto Rican Obituary* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), pp. 53-54.

In "The Old Buildings," Pietri defines the barrio by what it is not. The poet deals with the loss of his sense of identity and community after the demise of his neighborhood. He faces the specter of the anonymous public housing projects and the alienation that they cause. Urban Renewal was created for slum removal. In fact, neighborhoods were disrupted and whole communities destroyed.

The barrio dweller does recognize slums, deterioration, and filth when he sees them. And he does see them. But they never really become totally associated for him nor the poet with the term barrio. There can be barrios without slums, filth, and degradation. However, when speaking of these ills the Latino poet usually uses the term ghetto, not barrio. For the poets that we are studying, the ghetto is the result of oppression. The ghetto is created by the oppressor out of hate, mistrust, racism, capitalism. The barrio is created by the Latino not only to survive, but out of love of family, friends, neighbors. This view of the ghetto is seen in Miguel Piñero's "The Book of Genesis According to Saint Miguelito."

Before the beginning
God created God
In the beginning
God created the ghettos and slums
and God saw this was good.
So God said,
"Let there be more ghettos and slums"
and there were more ghettos and slums.
But God saw this was plain
so
to decorate it
God created leadbase paint
and then
God commanded the rivers of garbage and filth
to flow gracefully through the ghettos.
On the third day
God's nose was running
and his jones was coming down and God
in his all knowing wisdom
he knew he was sick
he needed a fix
so God
created the backyards of the ghettos
and the alleys of the slums
and heroin and cocaine
and
with his divine wisdom and grace
God created hepatitis
who begat lockjaw
who begat malaria
who begat degradation
who begat
GENOCIDE
and God knew this was good
in fact God knew things couldn't git better
but he decided to try anyway
On the fourth day
God was riding around Harlem in a gypsy cab

when he created the people
and he created these beings in ethnic proportion
but he saw the people lonely and hungry
and from his eminent rectum
he created a companion for these people
and he called this companion
capitalism
who begat racism
who begat exploitation
who begat male chauvinism
who begat machismo
who begat imperialism
who begat colonialism
who begat wall street
who begat foreign wars
and God knew
and God saw
and God felt this was extra good
and God said
"VAYAAAAAAAA"
On the fifth day
the people kneeled
the people prayed
the people begged
and this manifested itself in a petition
a letter to the editor
to know why? WHY? WHY? *que pasa* babyyyyyy?
and God said
"My fellow subjects
let me make one thing perfectly clear
by saying this about that
NO...COMMENT!"
but on the sixth day God spoke to the people
he said..."PEOPLE!
the ghettos and the slums
and all the other great things I've created
will have dominion over thee"
and then
he commanded the ghettos and slums
and all the other great things he created
to multiply
and they multiplied
On the seventh day God was tired
so he called in sick
collected his overtime pay
a paid vacation included
But before God got on the t.w.a.
for the sunny beaches of Puerto Rico
He noticed his main man satan
planting the learning trees of consciousness
around his ghetto edens
so God called a news conference
on a state of the heavens address
on a coast to coast national t.v. hook up
and God told the people

to be
COOL
and the people were cool
and the people kept cool
and the people are cool
and the people stay cool
and God said
"Vaya. . . ."[14]

But, of course, reality is not so cut and dry. Positive and negative attitudes toward the barrio and its physical environment at times appear in the same writer. Such ambivalence dominates Piri Thomas' autobiography, *Down These Mean Streets*, in which he pictures himself torn between love and hate for himself, his family, and his Spanish Harlem. These antagonistic sentiments even appear in the poetic prologue to the book:

YEE-AH! Wanna know how many times I've stood
on a rooftop and yelled out to anybody:
"Hey, World--here I am. Hallo, World--this is
Piri. That's me.
"I wanna tell ya I'm here--you bunch of mother-
jumpers--I'm here, and I want recognition, what-
ever the mudder-fuckin word means."

Man! How many times have I stood on the rooftop
of my broken-down building at night and watched
the bulb-lit world below.
Like somehow it's different at night, this my Harlem.
There ain't no bright sunlight to reveal the stark
naked truth of garbage-lepered streets.
Gone is the drabness and hurt, covered by a friendly
night.
It makes clean the dirty-faced kids.

This is a bright *mundo*, my streets, my *barrio de*
noche,
With its thousands of lights, hundreds of millions of
colors
Mingling with noises, swinging street sounds of cars
and curses,
Sounds of joys and sobs that make music.
If anyone listens real close, he can hear its heart
beat--

YEE-AH! I feel like part of the shadows that make
company for me in this warm *amigo* darkness.
I am "My Majesty Piri Thomas," with a high on any-
thing and like a stoned king, I gotta survey my
kingdom.
I'm a skinny, dark-face, curly-haired, intense Porty-
Ree-can--
Unsatisfied, hoping, and always reaching.

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[14]In Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, *Nuyorican Poetry* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1975), pp. 62-64.

I got a feeling of aloneness and a bitterness that's
growing and growing
Day by day into some kind of hate without *un*
nombre.
Yet when I look down at the streets below, I can't
help thinking
It's like a great big dirty Christmas tree with lights
but no fuckin presents.
And man, my head starts growing bigger than my
body as it gets crammed full of hate.
And I begin to listen to the sounds inside me.
Get angry, get hating angry, and you won't be scared.
What have you got now? Nothing.
What will you ever have? Nothing.
...Unless you copy for yourself![15]

But here again, when the word barrio is used, it has a positive connotation in association with "bright *mundo*, my streets, my barrio *de noche*," "swinging street sounds," "sounds of joy and sobs that make music," and "warm *amigo* darkness." Barrio to Thomas means friendliness, warmth, music, and his very own identity. But the rest of the poem is dominated by hate for the slums, the garbage, and the deprivation that have come to characterize the ghetto in the popular mentality.

Therefore, the barrio to the Latino means much more than what ghetto and slum do to the sociologist.[16] For the Chicano and Puerto Rican, the barrio is the forge on which his identity is shaped. It is his community--a spiritual domain. Its genesis might have been oppression, but it became much more and is much more. For sociologists to deal lightly with the barrio and its wealth of meaning is not only insensitive, but ignorant. To reduce the rich concept of barrio to its limited sociological use is to ignore the reality of Latinos, is to reduce the wealth of their cultural resources, their humanity, to that of a poor unfortunate laboratory specimen. The barrio is not a rat-maze nor the Latino a lower species that must be handled with sanitary gloves. The barrio provides the physical and social environment that produces the Latino. This barrio is a total society, a total environment that includes determinants of good and bad. It is not to be lauded. It is not to be shunned. It is to be understood.

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[15]Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets* (New York: New American Library, 1967), pp. 9-10.

[16]Social scientists, and especially sociologists, have created a myth concerning Spanish speakers in the United States. For an examination of the mythical Mexican American, see Herbert Hirsch, "Political Scientists and Other Camaradas: Academic Myth-Making and Racial Stereotypes," in Rudolph O. de la Garza, Z. Anthony Kruszewski, and Tomás A. Arciniega, eds., *Chicanos and Native Americans. The Territorial Minorities* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 10-22; and Octavio I. Romano-V., "The Anthropology and Sociology of the Mexican-Americans," *Voices* (Berkeley: Quinto Sol, 1973), pp. 43-56.

THE URBAN EXPERIENCE IN SELECTED CHICANO FICTION

MARVIN A. LEWIS

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

URBANA, ILLINOIS

In their landmark sociological study of Mexican-Americans, Leo Grebler and his co-authors make the following observations concerning population patterns:

> A population once dependent largely on agriculture is now so greatly linked with city life that many of its problems mirror the problems of urban America. And although on balance the group has benefited from the rural-urban shift, the transition has been associated with the usual stress of adjustment to the city, and compounded by the problems of minority status and often by language handicaps. Formal and impersonal controls enforced by an anonymous urban officialdom have replaced the informal and person-to-person contacts with authority in rural areas. There is a world of perplexing and ego-wounding forms and documents. City living compounds the problems of transportation and schooling. The new urban milieu often has a disruptive influence on family life.[1]

The purpose of this study is to determine to what extent, if any, urban problems, such as adjustment to the city, minority status, language handicaps, formal and impersonal controls, transportation and schooling, and a disruptive influence on family life, are artistically dramatized in selected Chicano fiction. The Los Angeles context seems to be the preferred location of a majority of artists in their assessment of Chicano urban conditions. Therefore, the focus of this paper will be on works treating aspects of the Los Angeles scene.

The period between 1970 and 1975 has seen some interesting developments in Chicano fiction. There was a concentrated effort, spearheaded by Quinto Sol/Tonatiuh International, to get Chicano artists published and read. Various Chicano cultural centers, especially on the West Coast, also entered the serious business of publishing Chicano artists. The result of these efforts has been a variety of literary forms which take a more open, commercial approach to the Chicano experience.

This paper will treat three stylistically different works of art: *Blue Day on Main Street* (1973), stories by J. L. Navarro; *The Gypsy Wagon* (1974), a collection of short stories edited by Armando Rafael Rodríguez; and *The Road to Tamazunchale* (1975), a novel by Ron Arias. The latter work will be the primary focal point of the discussion since the critical thrust of this paper is to show the progression from social realism to fantasy and magical realism in different interpretations of the urban experience. Selected short stories will be used

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[1]Leo Grebler, Joan W. Moore, and Ralph C. Guzman, *The Mexican American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), p. 112.

since it is impossible to treat each one individually in this paper. From *The Gypsy Wagon*, "Ellipses," "A Story," and "The Proletarian" will be briefly examined.

The Gypsy Wagon is a collection of short stories concerned with human experience. Life, death, and survival is the stuff which forms the essence of the work. Since each *cuento* has a different author, there is no uniformity in terms of style or narrative technique. Thematically, most of the works are connected by their assessment of the urban experience.

"Ellipses," by Yolanda A. García, is one of the more cleverly written stories of the selection, although more of the interpretation should be left to the reader. The narration begins with the following political posture:

> If, in the dawning of a person's life, he encounters circumstances and situations which cause that same dawn to turn suddenly and fiercely to noonday sun, sooner than expected, he may find himself in a state of perpetual futile revenge against those forces which have caused him to prematurely struggle with himself.[2]

This observation sets the tone of the story as Roberto and Miriam's romantic high school love affair turns into a nightmarish confrontation with daily reality in the adult world of Los Angeles. After marriage, the two are engaged in a struggle for survival. He maintains two jobs in an effort to support Miriam, the baby, and himself. The persistence of the never-ending *cucarachas* serves to lend a depressing note to the story.

The author uses both overt narration and subtle ways to dramatize their plight. The reader is told that: "Roberto unconsciously pushed at Miriam's back in their *twin* bed, causing her to face him and protest in turn, . . ."[3] . . . "He sprang out of bed and slowly pulled back a *thin*, *worn* curtain at the window."[4] (Emphasis added.) Their physical position also mirrors their mental state. A constant air of depression causes them to continually bicker between themselves.

Perhaps the most important element in "Ellipses" is the examination of the troubled psyche of Roberto, caused for the most part by everyday pressures. The central dream/nightmare in the story revolves around Roberto's brother being shot by the police and the resultant feeling of impotency experienced by Roberto. At the end of his dream, Roberto is in bed choking his wife instead of the policeman who was supposed to have killed his brother. Thus "Ellipses" is concerned with the effect of real or imagined situations upon life. The ending is such that we can imagine Roberto " . . . in a state of perpetual futile revenge against those forces which have caused him to prematurely struggle with himself." Roberto cannot change these forces, just as he cannot lift his family from the poverty which they are experiencing. The result is utter frustration and despair caused by both internal and external strife.

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[2]Yolanda A. García, "Ellipses," in Armondo Rafael Rodríguez, ed., *The Gypsy Wagon* (Los Angeles: Aztlán Publications, 1974), p. 5.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 7.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 9.

"A Story," by Francisco Martinez, explores the middle-class Mexican-American world of Frank, Sally, and their children who have made it. Once again the setting is Los Angeles, where the unrest of 1970 serves as a backdrop for the assessment of bourgeois attitudes of conformity:

> Frank in a rather cool voice tried to amuse his guests by pointing out that they were in a quiet community. Of course, his statement was directed to the several whites, supervisors of his, in the group. Immediately though, as if without any real suggestion from any source, the talk, of a buzzing nature, turned to the protest march that had passed by earlier in the day. Again Frank in a reassuring manner voiced that things are peaceful in East Los Angeles. In his slip of the tongue he blurted, "there is no need for another Watts."[5]

The story, narrated in a sarcastic manner, draws an analogy between a protest march and a birthday party. The two separate events are brought together when the police order everybody off the streets while breaking up the demonstration. The party participants comply with only a meek "Why?" Obedience to the law is primary. Frank, who has killed his son-in-law for beating Frank's daughter, is characterized as not having the guts to stand up to the police. Throughout, Frank is portrayed as a hard-working individual who has earned his place and now knows how to play by the rules. Frank's "story" is typical of people who struggle to achieve material progress and then quickly forget from whence they came. Class and status do not erase the pressure of minority status, but rather make it more bearable.

David J. González's "The Proletarian" deals with two barbers: one, José Navarro, beginning his career, and the other, Ernesto López, at the end. Both are looking for security--the former in life, the latter in death: "Ernesto had decided it was time to buy a piece of ground, a place to be buried. Just one more job and everything would be okay. He had worked all his life and had nothing to show for it."[6] Ernesto is presented as dying both a mental and physical death. In his agony, he raises pertinent questions concerning the oppressed working classes of people. "If we all die, why not do something besides work and produce workers by having children? Unless we can free them from the same suffering why bring them here?"[7] The inability to break class lines is the issue here as Ernesto sees perpetual suffering for his people. On the other hand, José can only think of the two dollars he advanced the man. Money, it seems, does cause a great deal of insensitivity, regardless of the ethnic background.

In a sense, the three stories deal with survival in the urban environment. The setting seems to increase the amount of tension experienced by characters since the emphasis is on making it on society's terms. Although the artists are young, they show a keen awareness of difficulties faced in the urban milieu.

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[5]Francisco Martinez, "A Story," in Rodríguez, *The Gypsy Wagon*, p. 51.

[6]David J. González, "The Proletarian," in Rodríguez, *The Gypsy Wagon*, p. 60.

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 62.

Whereas the three stories under consideration from *The Gypsy Wagon* present family situations, *Blue Day on May Street*[8] switches, for the most part, to the promiscuous world of the streets of Los Angeles.

Blue Day on Main Street contains twelve stories and a play which treat both rural and urban aspects of Chicano experience. Six of the selections--"Weekend," "Cutting Mirrors," "Blue Day on Main Street," "Tamale Leopard," "Frankie's Last Wish," and "Eddie's Number"--are thematically linked by their treatment of urban problems such as drug abuse, prostitution, and violence, which of course are not limited to the Chicano.

"Weekend" probes the adolescent world of Teddy and his relations with his girl, Tina, and friends, Peanuts and Little Man. The action takes place in the Elysian Park area where Teddy moves in a maze of marijuana, reds, wine, sex, and death. The guys' efforts to burglarize a liquor store end in utter frustration when they are unable to open the safe. Their escapade turns into an absurd orgy of refreshments before Teddy is shot as they flee the cops. Teddy is quickly forgotten by his friends as his death rapidly becomes everyday conversation. What is distinctly Chicano about this story is the appearance of certain types, such as the *vatos locos* and lowriders, as well as the intertwining of graffiti into the novelistic structure.

The story line is fairly simple. What does seem to be lacking is a sense of purpose among the characters, who appear to be moving blindly toward nothing. The need for control and direction is of primary importance and is emphasized by the absence of responsible grown-ups in the story. In "Weekend," just as in the aforementioned stories of *The Gypsy Wagon*, a hostile attitude toward the police, who represent "anonymous urban officialdom," is manifested. This posture is maintained throughout most of the collection.

"Cutting Mirrors" concerns the middle-class world of Anthony Alonzo, an advertising copywriter, and his reaction to his milieu. As Anthony sits in the country contemplating nature, the narrator surmises:

> As far as Anthony was concerned, the ads could wait. At this point in the day he didn't care whether he lost his job or not. The moment, this moment was enough for him. The mere thought of feeling cleansed from the city ways, and the ways he functioned in the city, had him at ease in a way he could not have felt in L.A. The air was clean and fresh; away from smog, he felt alive. All thought that came his way was welcomed. This mood was felt by every sense and cell, giving him knowledge of being Man rather than counterfeit Homo Sapien. In this and in many other thoughts he drenched his mind, gliding from mood to mood, not caring for answers, just for a moment of wholeness.[9]

During his autoassessment, Anthony reacts negatively to the institution of marriage and his economic situation. The urban experience weighs upon Anthony as he escapes into a fantasy world and dreams of a type of Utopia. His desire is to escape from the ritualistic world of nine to five and to return to a more simple existence. Anthony seeks spiritual as well as physical release. In his mind he

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[8] J. L. Navarro, *Blue Day on Main Street* (Berkeley: Quinto Sol, 1973).

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

is attacked by the mechanized world as he is unable to cope with daily existence. Alienation is the key issue as Anthony experiences estrangement from self, institutions, and his fellow man.

"Tamale Leopard" is a story of night life and prostitution told in a tongue-in-cheek manner as two lonely people, Alfred and Esther, seduce each other under false pretenses after meeting in a cantina.

"Eddie's Number" treats the old triad of dope, prostitution, and death. Johnny, the pusher, betrays Eddie, the hype, who is supported by Carmen, the hooker. Eddie is shot and killed by the police while resisting arrest.

"Blue Day on Main Street" is concerned with urban degradation as seen through the eyes of a man recently out of a mental institution. His focal point is Sixth and Main in downtown Los Angeles where he experiences some abnormal delusions. He assesses the situation: "As I look around me, I can't help thinking that what I see is just an extension of the place I left behind."[10] The entire story is a sequence of disjointed images which represent a protest against the absurdity of the urban scene.

"Frankie's Last Wish," one of the more artistically appealing selections, relates the confrontation between Pachucos and sailors in 1943 to the situation in Los Angeles in 1970. Payaso, one of the Pachuco participants, introduces the reader to the action.

> . . . singing in the village square: the señoritas are passing by with roses in their hands. Mando. The shotgun. He has a .22 in his pocket. Use it. The rifle poised. The horse fell. A bullet in the head. Closer. Hector. Shined his shoes all day for the fight. Spit. He could see himself in them. The bleeding heart throbbing in the light of the flaming Sun. He won't die. The people waiting, watching, watching. Can see them through the corner of my eyes. Across the street. A cross. He won'd die. Drink the wine that will kill him for three days. Somewhere else; elsewhere again. Alive again. Closer. Heart beating in anticipation of the knife. Closer. Alive. In México. The desert heat. The sticky juice of the cactus. In L.A. In México. On Main Street. The people, shouting. Wanting blood. Anybody's blood. Crowds of hungry flesh eaters. Eating with their eyes. Feeding what they feel with what they see. Virgins. The pace is slow. Bleeding hands of blood. Hector's shiny shoes. She won't die. Sweat gathering on my brow. Damp climate. The spear, the fish, the spear and the miss and the warm damp climate. Closer. They keep coming. Sailing. What did they want? Why this? The gold. Plumed headdress. The dance last night at Cuco's house. The feathers and the paint and the brown dancers dancing for the harvest. Slow numbers got me hard against Virgie. Wooden ships. Closer. Tall waves. She was fine. Did it good. Won't go back. Fear. I feel fear. He's dead. Loco. Closer. Won't die. Got my gun. The earth is quaking and the thunder of its anger devours. Man. He called me a man. Then. The sailor the night last week said punk, greaser, dirty Mex. The man of bronze called me a man. Closer. The sailor. Told him to suck it. Fuck him. All the same. Killed Loco. The furs and the cold and the meat and the rawness of it and the

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[10] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

> taste of blood. Wine. Had wine before coming down. Warm now. Pato and his machete. Chop some head, Pato. Yesca was good too. Two of them. Ripped out. I watched. Red flowers off a bush of flesh. Richard said they raped his sister. For survival. I watch them coming. Closer. Coming and we going to meet them. To fight them. Warm and not afraid because it's too late to fear what is coming closer. . . .[11]

There is a juxtapositioning of time and space as the situation in Los Angeles is related to an Aztec sacrificial ceremony in Tenochtitlán and vaguely to the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Payaso's primary thoughts are of his Aztec heritage which will hopefully help sustain him during the confrontation. At the same time ruminations about more immediate physical pleasures are also evident.

These two primary incidents lend historical perspective to Chicanismo as the author draws an analogy between the Aztec past and attempts at self-definition, embodied in the Pachuco movement, in the twentieth century. Blood and sacrifice are foremost in both epochs.

As the scene shifts, the atmosphere reflects a dramatic change to the world of Frankie and his lowriding friends, concerned more with escape from, rather than confrontation with, daily reality. A link between past and present is maintained through the presence of Stella, Payaso's sister, who is now an alcoholic and aunt of Martha--one of the gang. Also there is an effort to present Aron as a reincarnation of Payaso through physical similarities:

> Payaso reached up to scratch at his left ear. There was a mole just behind the lobe of the ear.[12]
>
> . . .
>
> Aron rubbed the mole behind his left ear and, to Stella, said, "Who's the guy in the picture?"
>
> "That's my brother."
>
> "Oh yeah. Where's he at now?"
>
> "Dead. He got killed during the riots of '43."
>
> "I heard about them," Frankie said. "My uncle told me. He said them were some bad days."
>
> Aron looked at the boy's face in the photograph. He somehow felt that he knew whoever it was very well.[13]

In the ensuing debate between Aron and Frankie over who is going to possess Stella, Frankie is shot and killed. Events of 1970 are in ironic contrast to the sacrifices made in 1943. Payaso's counterpart and friends are bent on self-destruction and annihilation of their fellow Chicano instead of being united against a common enemy. This is true because of the heavy use of drugs and the need to play a role.

A brief examination of these stories which set the tone of *Blue Day on Main Street* reveals that Navarro's focus is not on traditional rural problems of Chicano existence, but rather he deals with the confrontation of new aspects of

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[11] *Ibid.*, p. 81

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 80

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

the urban milieu. True, the police, drugs, sex, violence, alienation, etc., have always been there, but the author's concern is the toll they take on the younger generation. Society is partially to blame for the new promiscuity which reaches down into the barrio and destroys. The urban scene has prompted a rash of drug use and crime which often ends tragically.[14]

The Chicano novel, too, has been concerned with the urban environment, ranging from the surface treatment of the topic by Richard Vásquez in *Chicano* (1970) to the agonizing border experience portrayed in Miguel Méndez's *Peregrinos de Aztlán* (1974), where the city literally destroys its inhabitants. More recently, however, the Chicano novel has gone beyond social realism in treating the urban scene to enter into the realm of fantasy. Such a work is *The Road to Tamazunchale*[15] by Ron Arias. The approach here to the novel will involve examining the themes of the *mojados*, or wetbacks, a historical Chicano urban problem, and the search for Paradise. These themes are inextricably bound together in the novel. While the novel is also concerned with some of the urban problems pointed out at the beginning of the study, Arias treats them on a different literary plane.

The Road to Tamazunchale explores the world of the aging Fausto Tejeda as he confronts the fact that he is dying. Fausto has been ill for the past six years and under the care of his niece, Carmela, who serves to maintain a balance between reality and fantasy. Fausto's dead wife, Evangelina, his alter ego, also functions in this capacity. Fausto's mental processes oscillate between the reality of Los Angeles smog and freeways from which he wishes to escape and the fantasy of real or imagined heroic incidents in the past. The majority of his actual time is spent in a darkened bedroom in a dream world. Chapter One introduces us to the family situation and closes on the following note: "In silence the old man listened carefully for the song of life. Curled in the darkness somewhere beyond the house, it beckoned with the faint, soft sound of a flute. Then it was gone."[16] The flute, a central image of life/death, recurs numerous times throughout the novel and is related to the Peruvian motif personified by Marcelino Huanca, the shepherd, and his alpacas.[17] Early in the second chapter, Fausto

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[14]Commenting on the relationship between poverty and crime in the cities, Joan W. Moore, *Mexican Americans*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1976), pp. 76-77, observes: "Chicanos share disproportionately in two types of arrest and convictions--in youth crime, particularly in activities related to the traditional Mexican urban gangs, and in narcotics. An exceptionally high proportion of the Mexican American individuals incarcerated in California state institutions are persons involved with narcotics, either directly or indirectly, and who have a history of juvenile offenses."

[15]Ron Arias, *The Road to Tamazunchale* (Reno: West Coast Poetry Review, 1975).

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 14.

[17]It is necessary to clarify early possible symbolic levels of the novel since we are not limited to the artist's literal world at all times. In J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1962), are the following explanations: "The basic meaning of the flute corresponds to erotic or *funereal* anguish" (p. 105); and "The *shepherd* is also the conductor of souls to the Land of the Dead--the psychopomp, and a symbol of supreme powers since flocks are representative of the cosmic forces" (p. 280). (Emphasis added.) These motifs are directly related to our interpretation of the novel's archetypal thrust.

embarks on an imaginary voyage to Peru, which provides the opportunity for him to make a comparison between the great American civilizations of Tenochtitlán and Cuzco.

Humor is a key ingredient in the novel. Most of the incidents in which Fausto could have actually participated are presented in an absurdly hilarious manner. During a bus trip downtown, he is ridiculously dressed, encounters a herd of alpacas on the freeway, meets Mario, an aspiring *vato loco*, disrupts a funeral procession, and evades capture by the police. After Mario steals Carmela's boyfriend Jesse's car, the odd couple goes joyriding in Elysian Park where images of the past surface. These recollections serve to maintain Fausto's contact with reality:

> Fausto remembered his neighbor's face behind the tall, chain-linked fence. Tiburcio had been mistakenly corraled in an Eastside roundup of Mexican illegals and was in a terrible mood. The academy tennis courts were covered with men.[18]

The incident recalls indiscriminate acts of deportation, perhaps of the 1930's, which form a part of collective Chicano history and memory.

The theme of *mojados* is quite prevalent in *The Road to Tamazunchale*. The *mojado* incident is prompted by the appearance of David's corpse, as he has apparently drowned while attempting to swim across the river.[19] David is cared for by the people in Fausto's barrio, especially Mrs. Rentería, a lonely woman who uses him for positive psychological reasons. In the past, Fausto may have actively engaged in the illegal human traffic. However, in his present condition, Fausto imagines a situation in which he provides services for the *mojados* and gives them dignity. Thus he conceives of himself as a maker of history rather than a mere participant. Arias' magical treatment of the episode assures a certain amount of distance which minimizes overt social protest.

Fausto's grand plan to bring the *mojados* across in ships is not realized in life. However, in his fantasy world, he leads them across the border, up through Southern California, and into Los Angeles. Eventually the *mojados* and the barrio residents act out scenes from a play, "The Road to Tamazunchale," which gives title to the novel.

The central place image of the novel, Tamazunchale, represents Paradise--a place where there are no problems or worries.[20] This is what Fausto envisions both for himself and for the *mojados*. This idea is reinforced throughout the novel in several places. For instance, in Chapter Two, Fausto's dreams have him in the unspoiled indigenous world of the Incas, but in reality he is on the floor of his bedroom. The idea of the young Inca shepherd, Marcelino Huanca, and his alpacas who have lost their way also suggests a simpler world. It is worth noting

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[18]Arias, *The Road to Tamazunchale*, p. 34.

[19]This incident is mindful of a story by Gabriel García Márquez, "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World," in *Leaf Storm and Other Stories* (New York: Avon Books, 1973), pp. 145-54.

[20]From the editor's *Postscript* (Tamazunchale): "A naturalists' and sportsmen's Eden--river fishing from dugouts, mountain game" (p. 108).

that it may be possible to extend the Paradise image to the very Elysian Park in which Fausto and his friends congregate, although we know that this is a legitimate place.[21] This park is presented as a type of "*locus amoenus*" and is also, symbolically, Fausto's final resting place:

> Except for the cars, the park was deserted. The streets were gone, some trees had shriveled, others had grown. Squirrels poked their heads out of the leaves on the ground, a bank of snow lay gleaming on the ridge below the blue, richly blue sky. A fantailed pigeon escaped the jaws of a snake by swooping up as a hawk, losing itself among the uppermost pines. And there was silence, then the sounds of other birds, of crickets, of frogs by the eddies of a stream. A rabbit moved among the ferns, a twig cracked under the weight of age and a bobcat's paw. The grasses grew high, and the flowers bent with the breeze then sprang back and curled their heads to the sun. The scent of pine and sage mingled with the smells of moist earth, tiny onion shoots and the tangled fountains of wild strawberries.[22]

Obviously the accent here is on the natural world and serves to demonstrate that, in the end, Fausto has truly arrived at his destination, a friendly coalescence of Man, other Animals, and Nature. Marcelino Huanca, the flute, and alpacas all form a part of this peaceful union. The novel closes with the Tejedas contemplating an absurd world from their heavenly vantage point.

The preoccupation with nature is in direct juxtaposition to the stark freeways, cars, smog, and other aspects of the Los Angeles civilization. Fausto is characterized as always looking for the simpler things in life. A snow cloud, which appears briefly and causes a stir in the barrio, represents a purifying element in the dirty environment. Through suggestive imagery and subtle dramatization, Arias is able to accomplish by inference what other artists, Navarro for instance, present overtly.

Fausto's barrio is populated by types such as Mrs. Rentería, the spinster; Smaldino, the fisherman; and Cuca, the *curandera*--all of whose presence help convey a sense of community. However, since Fausto is the primary literary focus, these characters move in and out of his world without any great impact on events.

Unlike most other Chicano novels, *The Road to Tamazunchale* is not basically concerned with social problems of the Chicano. At times allusions are made to these problems in the past in an effort to place the present in its proper perspective. The work's primary concern is with a dying man who happens to be Chicano. On the other hand, certain customs, modes of behavior, and attitudes toward life make us realize that we are dealing with a work which is distinctly Chicano.

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[21]The name association is quite apparent to those familiar with Greek mythology, where the name Elysian is synonymous with Paradise: "On the western margin of the earth, by the stream of Ocean, lay a happy place named the Elysian Plain, whither mortals favoured by the gods were transported without tasting of death to enjoy an immortality of bliss," in Edmund Fuller, ed., *Bulfinch's Mythology* (New York: Dell, 1967), p. 14.

[22]Arias, *The Road to Tamazunchale*, p. 104.

In light of the central question posed in this paper (the extent of the fictional representation of certain common themes in Chicano fiction), it is safe to say that Chicano artists are no longer concerned with merely saying the obvious. The urban situation has created an environment in which the old problems of discrimination, police brutality, inequality, and family unity have been compounded immensely by the addition of new ones such as drugs, inflation, alienation, and crime, which transcend ethnic and cultural lines. As pointed out in the initial quote concerning the Chicano population, " . . . many of its problems mirror the problems of urban America." In the case of *The Road to Tamazunchale*, these problems are handled on a symbolic rather than a literal level.

In treating these motifs, the authors also supersede cultural limitations in terms of audience. For the most part, the young artists of *The Gypsy Wagon*, J. L. Navarro, and Ron Arias write for a general audience as far as a surface interpretation of their works goes. However, in the more accomplished stories of Navarro and in Arias' novel, an understanding of the Chicano substructure greatly enriches the reader's experience. In a sense, the artists reflect the dual aspects of their culture. There is a need to present common urban problems while maintaining a strong sense of Chicanismo.